

Gladys Mitchell

No Winding-Sheet



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Gladys Mitchell

Bradley 65

cover



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After more than fifty years of crime-writing, Gladys Mitchell died in July 1983 at her home in Corfe Mullen, Dorset. *No Winding-Sheet*, which went to press shortly before her death, is set in the school surroundings that she knew so well from her many years of teaching. It is her 66th crime novel.

Mr Pythias, the geography master at Sir George Etherege school, fails to reappear for work at the end of the Christmas holidays. Also missing are several thousand pounds collected for a school trip to Greece. Pythias is suspected of having absconded with the money, but police inquiries at the school and the master's lodging-house draw a blank.

The mystery deepens when a dead body is discovered buried on the school premises and two boys disappear from the school. Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley and her intrepid assistant Laura Gavin are called in to track down the boys and solve the riddle of the vanishing schoolmaster.

‘Gladys Mitchell was a much-admired member of the great sisterhood of English detective writers from the late 1920s onwards, headed by Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie. They all avoided unnecessary violence and concentrated on the whodunnit puzzle.’

—*Daily Telegraph*

Gladys Mitchell's first novel, *Speedy Death*, was published in 1929, and she continued to write until just before her death, building up a devoted following. Her style and originality received consistently glowing praise. She spent over forty years as a schoolmistress, and several of her books are set in a school environment. She died at the age of 82, in July 1983.

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To my grandnephew
DOUGLAS JAMES MITCHELL
with love and best wishes

1

Unexplained Absence



At the end of the Christmas vacation the Sir George Etherege school re-assembled on a Thursday and each form master kept his own class so that textbooks and stationery could be distributed, dinner money collected, timetables dictated and nametapes on shorts and gym shoes inspected. The Sir George Etherege was a well-run school, but, even so, the staff were glad enough of a weekend respite when the first two days of the term were behind them and normal working could be resumed.

Every Monday morning, however, was still a detested beginning to the week, for, until the mid-morning break, each master again had to keep his own class instead of teaching his specialised subject. There were reasons for this. On Mondays after assembly, the dinner money for the week was collected by the dinner monitors, who then took it to the school secretary's office. With any luck they could contrive that this coveted chore kept them out of lessons for up to twenty minutes if she was on the telephone or in consultation with the headmaster. Even three-quarters of an hour was not entirely unheard of.

Then there were the winter swimmers. During the summer term swimming was a compulsory subject and was part of the physical education course, but in the Easter term only those boys were taken to the municipal baths whose parents were prepared to pay the fee.

There were also the Catholics, a small minority but one which had permission to be out of school for an hour from nine-thirty on Mondays so that they could receive instruction in their faith from the parish priest.

'If only the Church had stuck to Latin,' said a junior master, 'the priest might teach them enough of that logically constructed language to improve their written English. As it is, the whole system is wrong and ought to be scrapped.'

'What we need,' said someone else, 'is to extend the system, not do away with it.'

'As how?' asked another young man.

‘Well, we get rid of the swimmers and the priest’s lot, so why not the C. of E’s, the Free Church adherents and the Sally Anns? We have one or two Jewish boys also. If we could get shot of the lot of them on Monday mornings, we could all have a free period until break or even not come in at all until about eleven. How about that?’

‘Might work if all the parents were worshippers,’ said Pybus, the art master, ‘but with seventy per cent of them never going anywhere near a church of any sort, you might find yourself worse off if you put your idea into practice. You might have to keep your own class until Monday dinner-time. Ten to one you wouldn’t persuade the various denominations to stick to the nine-thirty to ten-thirty schedule that the priest accepts.’

At this point, on this particular Monday morning, the deputy head (still known to most of the profession as the head assistant) came into the staffroom, looked around at the assembled company and said, ‘Oh, Pythias not in again? I expect there will be a medical certificate this morning. Oh, well, we’ve all got our own boys until break, so I can leave the sixth to get on with private study and double up for him when I’ve seen my lot settled. At break I’ll let you know who’s got to lose free periods for the rest of the day.’

‘Well, count me out,’ said the history master. ‘I did two stints for Pythias last week.’

‘Didn’t we all?’ said another voice.

‘There’s the bell,’ said the deputy head. ‘I’ll let you know at break, then, who’s drawn the short straw.’ When assembly was over, he went to the headmaster to report.

‘Everybody in except Pythias,’ he said.

‘What, again?’

‘Yes. I suppose he’ll have sent in a medical certificate this morning.’

The headmaster opened his door and said to the prefect who was doing private study in the vestibule and keeping an eye on the queue of boys waiting to hand over dinner money to the secretary, ‘Ask Mrs Wirrell to spare me a moment, Pitts. Ah, Margaret,’ he went on, when she entered his office, ‘has the post come?’

‘Yes, mostly educational publishers’ catalogues. I was going to bring them in when I’d checked the dinner money.’

‘Nothing from Mr Pythias?’

‘No. Isn’t he in?’

‘He is not in and this is his third day. No telephone message, either? He

really ought to have found some way of letting us know by now. See to the dinner money and then get his lodgings on the telephone, will you? Ask whether his landlady can account for his absence and tell her a medical certificate is needed. If he is ill, he must have seen a doctor.'

The secretary (Mr Ronsonby sometimes told his wife that he would sooner lose any member of his staff, even Burke, the deputy head, rather than let Margaret Wirrell go) returned to her office and rang up Mr Pythias's landlady.

'George Etherege school here. Can you give us any news of Mr Pythias? He hasn't been in since the holiday and we've had no medical certificate... No, he hasn't shown up this morning, either... You haven't seen him since the school broke up?... Oh, I see... You think he has been staying with friends over Christmas? Yes, I see. Very well, I'll tell the headmaster. Thank you.' She rang off and went back to make her negative report.

'No luck about Mr Pythias. He isn't at his lodgings. The landlady says he went away for Christmas, and she hasn't seen him since the Friday we broke up. He seems to have walked out on her without giving notice.'

'Well, we ought to have heard from him by now. It sounds as though there must have been a disagreement.'

'She said nothing about anything like that.'

'Whatever can have happened to the man? Look, Margaret, you've got to go out this morning to bank the dinner money. Could you call and have a word with the woman? Before Christmas? And she hasn't heard from him?'

'So she says.'

'That seems strange and I shall be glad of an explanation. I need not tell you to be tactful with her, but, really, I do think she ought to have let us know that he had not shown up. Here we have been waiting since Thursday and have had no news of him at all.'

'I'll ring her again and find out when she will be in. Any time before lunch will do for banking the dinner money.'

'Yes,' said the headmaster, 'and that reminds me. I wonder whether Pythias has banked the journey money? One cannot be too meticulous where school funds are concerned.'

'I told him you had suggested that I took charge of the cash as it had to be banked in a separate account, but he said he had seen you about it.'

'Yes, he did see me. He was anxious to keep the matter in his own hands and, as he had made all the arrangements and had organised the whole thing, I thought it right to allow him to do it his way. After all, he is the senior geography

master and has travelled in Greece, of which he is a native, and has given up much of his own time to working out all the details of this journey to Athens.'

'The staff are usually only too glad to push school money matters on to me, so I was quite glad to let him carry on on his own.'

'Money collected from the parents in such large amounts is always a responsibility, of course. I wish now that we had not waited so long before chasing him up, but Pythias has been on the staff for some time and one dislikes the idea of chivvying and harassing a sick man. When you see the landlady, do not give the impression that we are worried in any way, but point out that the situation has taken on an air of slight mystery which is rather disturbing. Anyway, see what she has to say. She may be able to clarify the situation in a more satisfactory way than she was willing to do over the telephone.'

'It didn't sound much like it just now,' said the secretary.

It sounded even less like it when she encountered the landlady face to face. The house was a large Victorian residence built at a time when the children of middle-class families were numerous, but now the rooms were let as bedsitters. Apart from the landlady and her husband, there were now five tenants, the woman told Margaret.

'I don't take marrieds,' she said, when she and Margaret had summed one another up, 'or any other kind of couples. Never know who you might get, do you? Single gentlemen such as Mr Pythias are what I cater for, and no visitors allowed. Like I told you over the phone, the last day I sees him he come back as usual — well, a bit later, actually, because he had had some paperwork to do in connection with the school journey this next summer, he said, kind of apologising for being a bit late for his tea.'

'Oh, you knew about the journey.'

'My sister's boy is going.'

'Oh, yes? He's at the school, then, is he?'

'Wilbey, his name is, Chad Wilbey.'

'Oh, yes, I know Wilbey. He is in 5A, isn't he?'

'That's right. You must have a wonderful memory for names.'

Margaret, who, as the headmaster could have testified, had a wonderful memory for more important things than the names of the boys who had been in the school longest, said: 'Mr Pythias has arranged the whole journey, as, of course, he has lived in Greece and knows it well. Did he seem quite like his usual self when you saw him last?'

'Yes and no.'

‘How do you mean?’

‘He was all of a fidget, so I guessed what he’d got in his briefcase. You see, I knew the deadline for paying in the money for that trip to Greece because some of it was mine, me helping my sister out so her boy could go. Well, nobody pays away good money before they’ve got to, do they? I mean the electricity and the gas and the telephone and the rates and the income tax. You don’t part up until the last minute — well, most people don’t, do they?’

‘No, I suppose that’s true.’

‘So I says — kind of joking, like, not wishing to give offence to a good tenant — as I suppose he’s worth robbing, at which he looks at me very straight and asks what I think I’m talking about, so I looks at him just as straight and says, if his briefcase is crammed with what I think it’s crammed with, I’m not having it under my roof for Friday night, Saturday and Sunday, as it should have been banked Friday dinner-time. “It’s asking for trouble,” I says, “in these wicked, unlawful times,” I says, “when you don’t know who your friends are and all this crime about,” I says. “You should have got that money in earlier,” I says, “and banked it in your dinner-time,” I says, “and not brought it into a respectable house to be a temptation to goodness knows who.”

‘Well, he turned very huffy and said as he had no intention to burden me or himself with any responsibility and as soon as he’d had his tea the money would be put in a safe place — “and not in *this* house,” he said nasty-like. So I give him his tea — a nice bit of cured haddock off the thick end and a poached egg on top — and then he tells me as he is going off by train that very evening to spend Christmas with his friend.

‘“I thought as you was going on Monday,” I says. “I’ve changed my mind,” he says, “and my friend will be expecting me.” So off he goes with his briefcase, and that’s the last I seen of him.’

‘Didn’t he take a suitcase?’

‘Not unless he took it in the morning and left it at the station on his way to school. I never seen him actually leave, so I can’t say as to that, but my nephew says he only had his briefcase when he left.’

‘I see. But when he didn’t turn up again, didn’t you wonder what had happened to him?’

‘Well, I seen as he took umbrage when I told him he ought to have banked the money instead of bringing it into my house and *I* had took umbrage when he said (more or less) as there might be dishonest people here, so when he never come back I guessed he had changed his lodgings, but I *did* expect to get his

notice which has never come, and that *do* surprise me, because he always acted very proper and as a gentleman should, taking his hat off to me in the street and everything.'

'But you didn't do anything about his leaving like that? It must have put you out.'

'Do anything? I telephoned round all the hospitals, that's what I done, but I couldn't get any news. Of course, he had never told me where his friend lived, so he may be in hospital somewhere miles away. I reckon I done all I could. What more could anybody expect?'

'Perhaps you could have telephoned the school and let us know that he hadn't come back.'

'Why should I do that? If a tenant walks out on me, do I want everybody to know?'

'You didn't think he was the sort who *would* walk out on you. You've just said so. I wish we knew the address of this friend of his. He may have been taken ill there. We need a medical certificate to cover his absence, you see.'

'He never volunteered no address and it wasn't no business of mine who he went and stayed with. It might have been a lady. You never know, with them quiet ones, what they gets up to on the sly, but I believes in minding my own business so long as my lodgers keeps my rules.'

'Did he have regular letters from anybody?'

'I couldn't say. The girl puts out the post on the little table in the hall and the tenants picks up their letters either, before they go to work or when they come in, the post not arriving at exactly the same time each morning. Here!' She eyed Margaret and spoke excitedly. 'You don't think he's gone and scarpered with all that money, do you?'

'Good gracious, no!' But it was a thought which had been in Margaret's mind ever since she had left the headmaster's study. 'Teachers don't do that sort of thing.'

'Only some of the parents have had a job to scrape the money together, you know. It isn't all that easy, when you've got a family, to find eighty pounds.'

'The school would make everything good, but there's no question of Mr Pythias doing anything wrong. If you want to know what *I* think, I think Mr Pythias has met with an accident which hasn't injured him enough for him to be taken to hospital but has given him a shock and caused him to lose his memory for a time. He may be wandering about, not knowing who he is or where he ought to be. He must be found, for his own sake.'

‘I don’t want to get mixed up with the police!’

‘Neither does the school, but he’ll have to be accounted for, won’t he? I mean, if he had decided to give notice to you, he would have done it before this. Besides, he would have turned up at school, no matter where he spent the Christmas holidays, unless he was ill. This really must be looked into.’

‘Well, I didn’t really think he was the sort to just walk out without giving me his notice, I’ll allow that. Besides, his clothes, most of them, are still here. Naturally I’ve been to his room to check. Perhaps it is a bit worrying, like you say.’

‘I wish you had let us know that he had left here.’

‘Well,’ said the landlady, ‘all I could have told you is that he isn’t here now. I couldn’t tell you where he had gone, so you’d have been no better off as to that, would you? I don’t reckon it was any of my business to let the school know.’

The news with which Margaret Wirrell returned to the school perturbed Mr Ronsonby deeply. He sent the secretary for the deputy head and, when Burke came in, he said, ‘Pythias has not returned to his lodgings. He had all that money with him when we broke up for Christmas and then had an argument, it seems, with his landlady. Because of this, he went off earlier than expected, carrying the money with him, and I have a most uneasy feeling that he may have been set upon and robbed.’

‘I suppose that’s possible,’ said Burke. ‘A good many people knew about the journey to Greece. Quite a number of parents had opted to join the party and any number of others must have heard about it and knew the date by which payments had to be in, but how do we know he didn’t go back to his lodgings?’

‘Margaret has just returned from a visit to Pythias’s landlady. The woman knows nothing about him since the Friday on which we broke up. If the money has gone, it will have to be replaced, of course. I am deeply concerned for Pythias. I’m afraid it means calling in the police and that will involve the school in the last kind of publicity we want.’

‘There’s the time lag, too,’ said Burke. ‘It’s more than three weeks since we broke up. I suppose — ’ He hesitated and Ronsonby finished the sentence for him.

‘The unthinkable can’t possibly have happened,’ he said. ‘Pythias cannot have absconded with the money. I will never believe that of a member of my staff.’

2

In Retrospect



Mr Ronsonby had more things on his mind than the mystery of Mr Pythias's absence from his duties, worrying, inconvenient and puzzling though that was.

Although the Sir George Etherege school had been operating for some time, the buildings were still being completed. They had been planned and the foundations laid when the 1939 war put an end to the project for years. Boys continued to attend what had become known as the Old School, about a mile away from the present building. Expanding numbers, however, and early murmurs of comprehensive education, had persuaded the education committee to reconsider the plan to build the new school on even more extensive lines than the original blueprint allowed for.

The consequence was that hordes of young workmen — to Mr Ronsonby and the staff their number appeared to be legion — sang, whistled and shouted their way through their own and the school's working day. They kicked footballs against classroom outside-walls during their tea breaks and drove the beleaguered garrison of earnest schoolmasters almost crazy when they operated a concrete mixer which, as one of the junior masters put it, 'made a row like the devil lambasting the legions of hell'. At any rate, while it was in action, it made any oral teaching impossible. Even the caretaker, an ex-policeman and unflappable in the ordinary course of events, began to feel the strain, but then, unlike the staff, he had to bear with the workmen and their noise during school holidays as well as after school hours and during Saturday overtime working.

The caretaker was named Sparshott. He had two children who were old enough to have left home, so, with his wife, his younger son and his dog, he lived in the cottage which had been built for him in the school grounds.

He disliked most of the schoolboys and he bitterly detested the young workmen, although he had made friends with their foreman, a man of his own age. Shortly before Christmas, he had said once or twice to him, 'Can't your lads

clear up as they go along? The asphalt's a shambles and the quad is worse. That hole they've sunk in the middle of the quad is big enough to bury an articulated lorry. Can't they fill it in before the end of the Christmas holiday? It's a bloody eyesore left like that.'

'I know, Mr Sparshott, I know. The thing is, you see, as it's there so's they can bury the rubbish as it comes along.'

'Then why can't they go ahead and bury it? It's an eyesore, I tell you. The headmaster was complaining about it after he took the morning assembly at the end of last term. From the platform, him and the staff have to look straight out of them big winders in the hall on to what looks like sommat as was left over from the blitz.'

'I know, Mr Sparshott, but till they've done with making a mess there's not much point in clearing of it up. They're all union men, and if I was to order 'em to bury all that rubbish and fill in the hole, I'd have big trouble on my hands. There's bound to be more rubbish before we've done, you see, and that 'ud mean digging another hole. They simply wouldn't do it, Mr Sparshott, not nohow.'

'There's another thing the headmaster wants to know. When is that back entrance going to be finished? Till them back doors is on and I can lock the school up secure come the night, nothing ain't safe from looters. As it is, youngsters gets in over the fence that's round the field and plays merry hell. They let all the school chickens out over Christmas, blast 'em!'

Although in his uniformed days he had had only a modest function in a village some thirty miles out of the town in which the new school was being built, Sparshott was a conscientious man trained to accept responsibility. He was keenly aware that the school building housed a large quantity of valuable material, and the fact that he could not lock the back doors worried him.

Evening classes used the school on three nights a week, so there were twenty brand-new typewriters in the commercial room. The school also possessed radio and television sets, and there were expensive tools in the woodwork centre and all kinds of sports equipment in the large cupboard in the gym. There was another cupboard in the library where the school orchestra usually kept its brass instruments, its strings, its woodwind and the tympani whose clangings, reverberations and boomings were so dear to their operators' hearts.

When Sparshott pressed his point, he was fobbed off again.

'Well, you see,' said the foreman, 'until we've finished with that there end of the building, there ain't no point in putting in them doors. Only be a hindrance to us, like, till we get that ten-foot drop from the library floor cased in. Nobody

excepting my lads don't know as that end of the school is open all the time, and I can trust my lads. They won't come back after hours nor touch anything as don't belong to 'em.'

Sparshott would like to have mentioned the complaints he had had from masters whose form rooms were at the back of the building, so that unceasing vigilance had to be exercised to make sure that venturesome boys did not fall down the ten-foot drop, but he realised that complaints would be useless. Neither was there any way of stopping young workmen from singing, whistling, shouting to one another and, worse than this, using their concrete mixer during school hours. He had contrived, with the assistance of the headmaster and the PE specialist, to stop the kicking of footballs against classroom walls during the workmen's tea breaks, but that was his only victory.

Fortunately for the headmaster and his secretary, their offices were at the front of the building and this had been finished for some time. So far as the ten-foot drop was concerned, there had been no casualties so far, although the headmaster had lost hours of sleep brooding upon the dangers, boys being what they are.

The caretaker had not reported the incident of the chickens, deeming it the work of naughty little junior-school boys and not worthy of Mr Ronsonby's attention, but there had been another matter which Sparshott felt did call for official notice. On the Friday when the school had broken up for the Christmas vacation he had gone on his rounds as usual to make sure that the cleaners were doing their job and that all the masters were off the premises. He was somewhat surprised to find Mr Pythias still in the staffroom.

'Sorry, sir,' he said. 'I thought as everybody had gone.'

'Got one or two things to finish off. Shan't be long,' said Mr Pythias. 'Thank goodness for these dark December evenings! At least the workmen have to give up early. Only time one can get a bit of peace in this place.'

Sparshott made another round of the school half an hour later, ascertained that the staffroom was now empty, and turned off one or two lights which had been left on in the corridors. He then paid the cleaners their weekly wage, saw them off the premises and locked the double gates at the end of the drive and the two side-gates by which pedestrians came in. This done, he went back to his cottage to have his tea.

As Mr Pythias had indicated, the workmen had left, that evening, as soon as it was too dark for outside work to be carried on, so all that the caretaker planned to do was to make his final round as soon as he had heard the nine o'clock news.

After that it was to be supper and bed.

Sparshott liked Friday nights. There were no evening classes, so he knew that he could 'shut shop' as soon as the last of the staff (usually the school secretary) had gone and then, apart from making his rounds accompanied by his dog, and except for unlocking the gates for the Saturday morning overtime workmen and the football team if the boys had a home match, the weekend was a period of blessed peace and quiet. On this particular Friday which ended the term, there were not even the school clubs to consider.

There was only one snag. During the summer evenings and on Saturday afternoons, he had to be on the alert to chase away small boys from the local primary school who climbed the fence round the playing field and came to play unlawful cricket or football on the school grass. The great gates and their side gates looked impressive and could not easily be scaled. In any case, they were in full view of the street. The field, however, was bordered on two sides by the back gardens of houses, and these gardens had back alleys which were a free-for-all and a passport to the school fence which any active youngster could scramble over with the help of his mates.

Young Sparshott, who was just sixteen years old and in the fifth form, said to his father after one of the caretaker's skirmishes with these infant trespassers, 'What harm do they do, dad? They've got nothing but a bit of asphalt playground at their school. They can't hurt the field just kicking a ball about, can they?'

'They don't stop at just kicking a ball about, son. Before the front of the school was finished and a proper coal shoot made, we used to have a whole mountain of coke shot on to the ground where the gym was to be built, and these little scaramouches used to run up and down it and reduce a lot of it to powder. Then there's all the stuff the builders leave about. I got a responsibility for that. The kids can have all they want of the field when they're old enough to be transferred to school here, same as you was. Until then, I reckon I've got to keep on the kee veevee and look after the school's interests.'

'Well, everything will be quiet enough while we're away over Christmas,' said his wife on that particular Friday evening while she was giving him his tea.

'Christmas don't last all that long and the builder's men will be in again after Boxing Day,' said Sparshott. 'There's no peace for the wicked, meaning me, love.'

'We've got to be thankful for small mercies. We're living rent-free and your money is good. Once the workmen clear off, we shan't know ourselves.'

‘They don’t seem in any hurry to get finished. There’s still plenty to do out the back and the quad’s a shambles. There used to be some sort of stone-built shack there before the school got the property, and all the builder has done is to pull the shack down and leave all the mess.’

‘But it will all be cleared up eventually, and you can forget about it over Christmas. What an expensive time Christmas is, though, with all the presents to buy.’

‘The Old Python will be worth robbing,’ said Sparshott junior, voicing a thought brought by his mother’s remarks. ‘He must have collected a mountain of lolly when everybody finished paying up for the school journey to Greece.’

‘*Mr Pythias* to you,’ said his father sternly.

‘OK, dad. All I meant was that today was his deadline for paying up for the Greek trip, so I reckon his briefcase is just about bursting at the seams with the money.’

‘He will have banked the money at midday.’

‘Not much he didn’t. He was on first dinner duty and after that he had to get his own nosh, and I know he did, because I was on second dinner and there he was at the staff table shovelling down chops and chips with shredded white cabbage on the side. Wish they served chops and chips to *us*!’

‘Mr Pythias was last off the premises tonight. Found him in the staffroom when everybody else had gone,’ said Sparshott to his wife.

‘I reckon he was killing time till his girlfriend got home,’ said his son. ‘Not as we’ve ever seen her, but —’

‘What on earth are you talking about? Haven’t you got any respect?’ said his mother.

‘Everybody’s got a bit of homework,’ said her son.

‘Don’t talk so coarse!’ said Mrs Sparshott.

‘You can’t expect him not to know the facts of life at his age,’ said Sparshott senior. ‘Another cup of tea, love, please.’

‘Can I do the rounds with you and Fangs tonight, dad?’ asked young Sparshott.

‘Yes, you generally do of a Friday. You can have a bit of a lie-in on Saturday morning so long as you gets your homework done.’

‘Only the set books to read during the holidays.’

The caretaker’s last round followed a fixed routine. First he visited and tested the front gates. When he walked back towards the school along the drive, he was facing the front entrance with the secretary’s office to the right and the

headmaster's sanctum to the left. He then turned and passed the headmaster's windows, the window of the main stockroom and the long stretch of the boys' cloakrooms and washrooms before he came to the end of the school frontage.

This brought him to an angle of the buildings and ultimately to where the back doors would be when they were fixed. Beyond this, another corner brought him round past the school canteen (a separate building which, strangely enough, was not under the headmaster's jurisdiction but was administered directly from the education department of the local council) and so to the front of the school again, to where he had left his son to keep an eye on the front doors.

Everything was quiet. The dog on the lead remained tranquil and, except for cars and an occasional bus passing along the main road outside the big gates, there was nothing stirring except the man, his son and his dog. They returned to the cottage, had supper and were soon in bed.

It was round about midnight when Mrs Sparshott woke. She, unlike her husband, was a light sleeper, but Sparshott, because of his police training, was wide awake once his eyes were open.

'What is it?' he said, in response to a wifely prodding.

'I don't know, but I think there's somebody about.'

'Oh, dammit! Are you sure?'

'I heard something.'

'Suppose I'd better take a look round, then. Boys up to something because of the holidays, that's all, I expect.'

'Take Ron with you.'

'No need to spoil the lad's sleep. Fangs will frighten them away if there's anybody about.'

'It's a bit late for skylarking boys. More like some of them young workmen after one of the school TV sets or something of that. You'll be careful, won't you? There'll likely be more than one young fellow and they're tough.'

The night was very dark indeed. On his evening rounds the caretaker always carried a powerful electric torch for, although he knew his way blindfold, the builder's men sometimes left heaps of bricks, sand, gravel, planks and other unexpected obstacles in the most unlikely places. Sparshott picked up his torch, roused his dog which, in winter, slept in the warmth of the kitchen, put the dog on a short lead and sallied forth.

What his wife thought she had heard he did not know, but there was no doubt about the accuracy of her statement that she had heard *something*. Conditioned by habit, Sparshott walked along the front of the bicycle shed towards the drive

and saw immediately that there was a light showing from inside the building.

The caretaker, with his dog's muzzle almost touching his left knee, went round to the back entrance. He pushed the heavy tarpaulin aside, inserted himself, slipped the lead from the dog's collar and put a warning hand on Fangs's head. Together they walked silently down the long corridor which separated one side of the quad from the classrooms on the other side of the passage.

When they reached the hall, electric lights illuminated the quad, for the hall on that side consisted of one long range of tall windows. Sparshott peered out, but could see nothing in the quad except that, here and there, were chunks of rubbish from the demolished farm building which had once occupied the site.

The caretaker retraced his steps. The corridor led to the entrance vestibule of the school and to another corridor between the hall and, at the vestibule end, the secretary's office, where the telephone was. As the man and his dog reached the corner where the two corridors met at right angles to one another, the dog growled.

Light was now streaming out from the hall, for the swing doors were open. Sparshott halted and called out, 'Show yourselves, whoever you are! Come on out of that! The dog's loose!'

At this, somebody snapped off the hall lights, Sparshott was hurled out of the way with considerable violence, the dog yelped as his paw was trodden on, and the next sounds were those of feet pounding down the corridor towards the back entrance. The dog, receiving no orders, remained where he was.

Only one thing consoled the battered caretaker. Flying arms as well as flying feet had convinced him that when the men — there were two of them for sure — had thrust him out of their way, they were carrying nothing. He collected himself, gripped his torch more firmly and went into the hall, as that — strangely he thought — appeared to have been the centre of the intruders' operations.

The push-bar doors on the quad side of the great hall were open. He could feel the cold air blowing in and, as well as that, there was the information which his torch disclosed. He went across to close the doors, but then decided to do as the trespassers appeared to have done. This was to switch on the hall lights again to give better illumination to the quad than the beam of his torch could do.

Having pressed the two sets of switches, each set just inside one of the two swing doors which led from the secretary's corridor into the hall, he crossed the hall again and stepped out into the quad.

So far as he could see, nothing in it had been altered. While construction

work was still going on, it remained a large rectangle of rough earth with the heaps of debris from the demolished farm building still rendering it the eyesore of which the headmaster had complained, and still in the middle of it was the hole in which, presumably, the debris would one day be buried. At one side of the hole there was the heap of dirt and gravel which had been excavated.

Picking his way, the caretaker went over to the hole. It was a gaping, untidy affair with slightly sloping sides down which the winter rain had seeped to leave a messy little quagmire at the bottom.

Sparshott switched on his powerful torch and peered down into the hole. A few bits of brick and concrete appeared to have been thrown in, but whether by the workmen or by the recent intruders it was not possible to say. Otherwise, nothing seemed to have been touched. Sparshott wondered whether his appearance on the scene had interrupted nefarious doings, but, short of the visitors having intended to heave chunks of brick at the library, the hall or the corridor windows, it was difficult to determine any possible reason they could have had for choosing to invade the quad.

Puzzled and somewhat worried, Sparshott returned to the hall, closed the doors which opened on to the quad, crossed the floor, switched off the lights and closed the swing doors to the corridor. Here he switched on his torch again, tested the lock on the secretary's office, crossed the vestibule and tested the headmaster's door, tried the big stockroom in which the television sets were kept when they were not in use, but found nothing either puzzling or disturbing. That the intruders had been up to some kind of mischief seemed clear enough, but whatever had been intended did not appear to have been carried out.

Sparshott had made representations more than once to the headmaster (and the headmaster, he knew, had passed them on to the education committee) that, while the building was so vulnerable, a nightwatchman ought to be employed 'on account I can't be about all days *and* all night, sir'. Now, it seemed, he had been right to make the request.

As he and the limping dog traversed the long corridor which led to the open back of the building, he half wondered whether the two men would be lying in wait for him. He gripped his torch more firmly. They had not been carrying anything, but, then, there was nothing in the hall or the quad worth stealing. He wondered whether they could have been two of the young workmen up to some sort of lark, or even two of the biggest schoolboys — there were some hefty young fellows in the football team — working off a dare.

Nobody interfered with his egress from the building, but, all the same, he

was upset and he said as much when he returned to his wife. She, admirable woman, had come downstairs and was making a cup of tea.

‘There was two of them,’ he said. ‘Up to some sort of mischief, I reckon, and I don’t like it much. It’s too easy for people to get in while there’s no back doors. Mr Ronsonby was going away for Christmas this evening, but I’ve got Mr Burke’s phone number, so I’ll try to get him first thing in the morning and make my report. It’s the first time we’ve had interlopers, so far as I know, but it only needs somebody to start this sort of thing and we’ll be in trouble. I can’t be on guard twenty-four hours a day. I’ve told Mr Ronsonby I reckon we need a nightwatchman as well as me, and he quite agrees, but, so far, he says the committee won’t stand for the extra expense. Once a couple of TV sets and half a dozen of them new typewriters have been whipped, maybe they’ll think again.’

His wife, attending to the dog’s paw, pointed out that it was morning already, so at half-past eight Sparshott telephoned the deputy head. Mr Burke promised to come round as soon as he had had his breakfast.

The workmen were on Saturday overtime, so Sparshott next accosted the builders’ foreman and asked him to find out whether any damage had been done to the fabric or anything belonging to his work party sabotaged in any way.

‘I reckon it was a couple of the bigger lads up to mischief,’ he said, ‘not as we gets trouble of that sort, not as a general rule. But I got Mr Burke coming in half an hour or so, and if there’s anything to report, I’d be glad to have notice of it to tell him, it being my responsibility, if you get my meaning.’

There was nothing to report except what Sparshott himself had noticed. The quad was a little tidier than it had been when the workmen had seen it last, and some of the broken stone, the litter of roof slates and the heap of damaged bricks which had resulted from the demolition of the farm outbuilding had been tossed into the hole, as Sparshott himself had already seen.

Mr Burke turned up at half-past nine. He received Sparshott’s report and then said briskly, ‘Well, I’ve got a full list of the school equipment in my room. We had better check to find out whether anything is missing.’

‘I doubt if it is, sir. Nobody that barged into me wasn’t carrying anything. By the look of the quad, sir, I reckon it was just a couple of louts getting up to their larks. Couldn’t have been a couple of our own bigger boys, could it?’

‘It doesn’t sound like anybody in the upper school to me. Any boys capable of exercising the violence you say was used on you could only have been sixth-formers or two members of the first eleven. However, let us do the rounds and see whether there is anything more we can find out. Have you contacted the

police?’

‘Thinking it might be boys, no, sir.’

‘Thank goodness for that. Oh, well, I’ll get my list and then we can check and find out whether anything has been taken. The two TV sets are locked up in the big stationery cupboard near the headmaster’s room, so, unless the lock has been forced, they should be all right. Fortunately the orchestra were allowed to take their instruments home with them, so no problems there.’

‘The big stockroom seemed all right last night, sir.’

They began with the secretary’s office. It was still locked, but Sparshott had a master key. Her desk was locked, too, and they left it untouched. Next came the room where all the stationery stock was kept. It also was still locked, as Sparshott had claimed. Burke, as senior master, had the key to it. He opened up and assured himself, with the caretaker as witness, that the television sets were there and that nothing had been disturbed since he himself had supervised the stowing away of the sets the day before.

From here the two men went up by the front staircase, opened the door of the staffroom, which was on the first floor, made a brief survey of the staff lockers and then Burke led the way along the corridor to the commercial room. Here were the typewriters, each hidden under its protective dustcover.

Burke took off every cover and made certain that all the typewriters were present and undamaged. Another thought had occurred to him while he was doing this.

‘I suppose it couldn’t have been a couple of evening-school students who hustled you?’ he asked.

‘*Could* have been, easy enough, sir, and likelier, p’raps, than our own boys, and also I did give a thought to some o’ them young workmen.’

‘Well, everything seems to be all right, so far, but we may as well make a thorough job of it.’

Across the corridor and opposite the commercial room was the handsome library. On one side of it the windows looked down on to the quad. Three young workmen were busy there, but their efforts appeared to be confined to throwing a few more chunks of rubbish into the hole and to make a pile of the rest of it against the outer wall of the corridor below the library.

‘Can’t see what they get paid overtime for, sir,’ said Sparshott, as he accompanied the senior master to the front door, which he unbolted and unlocked to let Mr Burke out.

‘Nor I, but we are in the contractor’s hands and, well, friends at court, you

know.'

'All the same thing on these local councils, I reckon, sir, but when they're your employers, it don't do to say too much, do it?'

He closed, but did not lock, the great front gates behind Mr Burke's car. There was still the builder's truck to leave by that exit. The men knocked off at twelve, however, and when he had seen them off and made the great gates secure, he went into the school and locked and bolted the front door, then went into the hall and had another look at the quad.

There were footprints around the open hole, but there was nothing to indicate whether they were the workmen's prints or those of the night's intruders.

3

An Addition to the List of Missing Persons



After Boxing Day the weather had become so inclement that for the following week no outside work was done on the school buildings. However, to the disgust of the women cleaners, the painters and decorators came to do the inside jobs and, as one disgruntled cleaner put it, ‘brought in with them all the muck as would stick to their boots before it got on to our floors’. By the time term began, clear, frosty weather had replaced the sleet and the rain and outside work had been resumed. Unexpectedly, the mess in the quad had been tidied up. It was assumed that either the builders had had a change of heart or that Mr Filkins had enlisted the help of the keener members of his gardening club to do the work before the beginning of term.

On the first day of term, Mr Burke came to report to Mr Ronsonby the caretaker’s story of the break-in on breaking-up Friday night.

‘I checked very carefully,’ said Burke, ‘and nothing is missing or damaged, neither has Sparshott heard or seen anything else untoward, so far as I know. I do think, though, Headmaster, now that the buildings are so nearly finished and the official opening seems to be in sight next term, that we ought to have a nightwatchman on the premises. There are loutish types about nowadays who have only to see something fresh, clean, admirable and new to be seized by a lust to vandalise and defile it.’

‘I’ll put to the committee this evidence of illegal entry given us by Sparshott, but I’ve tried before, as you know. Still, now that the school has definitely been broken into, my arguments may carry more weight.’

However, they did not carry any weight at all. Nothing had been stolen, the education office pointed out, nothing damaged or defaced, and the property was fully covered by insurance. No nightwatchman was appointed and, when this was relayed to the caretaker, Sparshott replied: ‘Well, Mr Ronsonby, sir, I shall continue to keep ears and eyes open, but a twenty-four hour day is asking too much of a man.’

‘I agree entirely, Sparshott. The ball, I feel, is in the committee’s court, and it is up to the education office to deal with it. Please don’t worry. After all, nothing but a bit of skylarking seems to have happened. One thing, the workmen have filled in the hole in the quad.’

There was another matter which was very much on the headmaster’s mind. Ought he or ought he not to report the absence of the Greek journey money? Mr Pythias’s continued non-appearance had been reported as a matter of routine, but the money, the headmaster decided, was a different kettle of fish. The education committee left the arrangements for all school journeys entirely to the discretion of the head teacher on the understanding that the committee accepted no responsibility for insuring the party against death, accident or the theft of personal property while the journey was taking place. Not all local authorities followed this plan, but in Mr Ronsonby’s area it operated. It was up to the sponsors of the trip to make certain that the money paid to the tour company included the personal insurance of every passenger.

‘I suppose it might be thought necessary to make a report that the money is missing,’ said Mr Ronsonby to his wife, ‘but I’m damned if I’m going to give anybody the satisfaction of believing that one of my staff has decamped with the takings. I would rather put up the cash for the trip myself. In fact, it looks as though I may have to do so.’

‘It would make a pretty big hole in our savings.’

‘I know, but I’d much rather carry the can than face a scandal involving one of my staff. Besides, I can’t believe that Pythias has defaulted. There must be some other explanation.’

‘One thing; it isn’t like the school fund. That has to be audited,’ said Mrs Ronsonby.

‘Oh, if it were the school fund, I’d have to report it. As it is, so long as I make good the money, nobody need be any the wiser.’

‘Mrs Wirrell knows the money has gone.’

‘Oh, Lord! If I couldn’t trust Margaret Wirrell not to talk out of turn, I would begin to distrust *myself*!’

‘I’m glad Margaret isn’t young and glamorous,’ said Mrs Ronsonby, smiling.

‘She was a chief petty officer in the WRNS in her young days. She could manage the school and the staff with one hand while she was signing for the latest consignment of stationery stock with the other.’

‘So you have quite decided that you are not going to report the loss of the money?’

‘So long as I make it good, nobody can complain, and if I did report it I should gain nothing but a name for washing the school dirty linen in public’

‘What do you think has happened to Mr Pythias? Can he have been set upon and hurt?’

‘I think we should have heard if that were the case. I don’t know what to think except, as I say, the one thought I am determined to put out of my mind.’

‘It’s much the most likely explanation, you know. If he had been beaten up and robbed, surely we should have heard of it by now, as you say.’

‘Not if he had been struck on the head and is suffering from amnesia. He may be wandering about, not knowing who he is or where he is supposed to be. Margaret suggested this and it does seem feasible.’

‘Surely the police would have picked him up before this if he were found wandering.’

‘One would think so. Anyway, I shall have to report to them that he is missing. We can’t go on in this state of uncertainty. It’s over three weeks since his landlady saw him last.’

‘That is the trouble, I suppose. The whole of the Christmas holiday and now these early days of the term have had to go by before anybody realised that he *was* missing. I blame that landlady. She *must* have known that something was wrong when he did not turn up again at his digs after Christmas. He would have gone to collect his things, even if there had been a row.’

The police took the same view. A plain-clothes detective turned up at the school and introduced himself as Detective-Inspector Routh. He brought a sergeant with him. Mr Ronsonby soon found that he had better revise his plan of saying nothing about the missing money.

‘We have visited the address you gave us, sir. The landlady can be of no help. Says the missing gentleman went away for Christmas and she hasn’t set eyes on him since. Thinks he took umbrage when she refused to accept responsibility for some money he was carrying. Do you know anything about that, sir? Would the money have amounted to anything in the nature of a considerable sum?’

‘I imagine so. I cannot give you any figures. It had been paid by boys, parents and staff to cover a school journey to Greece next summer. Mr Pythias preferred to keep everything in his own hands, as the trip was entirely his own idea. He is of Greek extraction and has travelled widely in his own country. He is also the senior geography master here. I was entirely happy to leave everything in his hands, but as to the actual amount—’

‘May I ask whether you parted from him on amicable terms, sir?’

‘Oh, yes, very much so. The senior staff always pop into my room on the last day of term to say goodbye and Pythias came in as usual with the others.’

‘To the best of your knowledge, did he get on with the other masters?’

‘So far as I know, yes, he did. My staff are a very united and friendly bunch.’

‘Can you tell me anything more about this money the landlady says he was carrying? You cannot name the exact sum, but is there anything else you know about it?’

‘I know people were very slow at paying it in to him. Practically all of it, I believe, came in on his deadline, which was the last day of term. He was occupied during that last school dinner-hour, and that meant that he took the money home with him, no doubt with the intention of placing it in a safe deposit for the weekend, as the bank would not be open to receive it over the counter until the Monday morning. That was too long a time to leave it unprotected.’

‘How many persons had opted to make the trip, sir?’

‘According to the figures I was given, sixty boys, ten parents and six staff. It was a package deal, of course, and three members of staff went free of charge, as each was responsible for twenty boys. The other three opted to accompany them and I imagine there was some arrangement about sharing expenses and all six taking equal responsibility.’

‘But not only those who were to make the journey would have known about the deadline for payment, I take it? The rest of the staff would have known, too, and the rest of the boys. A good many parents, too, whether they were going or not.’

‘Undoubtedly. So far as I am aware, the whole town could have known. It is the first time we have embarked upon quite so ambitious a project, and I have no doubt that, in a town of this comparatively small size, a great deal of general interest has been taken in it.’

‘It’s a pity about the lapse of time before the disappearance of the gentleman was reported, sir.’

‘I agree, but if the landlady did not report it, I hardly see who else could have done so. When the school is on holiday one hardly keeps tabs on the staff.’

‘These friends with whom I understand he was to spend Christmas. You wouldn’t know anything about them, I suppose? The landlady doesn’t seem to have seen anything of them at any time.’

‘I know neither their name nor where they live. My assumption, for what it’s worth, is that Mr Pythias never got to them.’

‘In that case, wouldn’t they have reported him as missing, sir? Presumably they would have been expecting him.’

‘One would think they would at least have made contact with the landlady, although my secretary tells me that she may not have been very anxious to encourage visitors to her rooms.’

‘Well, it’s all rather unsatisfactory, sir. If you don’t mind my asking, haven’t you a senior member of staff who might have his finger on the staff pulse, so to speak, somebody in touch in a different way from yourself with the other schoolmasters? It might be helpful to get his views.’

‘Somebody who is constantly in the staff room with the other men, you mean. Yes, there is Mr Burke, my deputy.’ Mr Ronsonby went to the secretary. ‘Margaret, could you page Mr Burke? He should be with the sixth in the library.’

‘Very good, Mr Ronsonby. Have you decided what I’m to do about this letter from the travel agents which came this morning?’

‘Ring them and say we’ll settle with them before the end of the week. It will take me that time to arrange to pay them the money.’

Mr Burke, a black-haired, blue-eyed man with a chin as blue as close-shaving of his face could make it, presented himself and greeted the inspector as an old friend.

‘Rodney is a pushover for his A-level English,’ he said. ‘Maths less certain, but stands a fair chance if he’s lucky with the questions, I’m told.’

‘That’s very gratifying, sir, but I haven’t come up about Rodney. You will know, I’m sure, that there is some anxiety about the non-appearance of Mr Pythias this term.’

‘Lord, yes. Speculation is rife. All sorts of rumours are flying around.’

‘How do you mean, sir?’

‘I’ve heard all shades of opinion expressed, from murder with intent to rob down to (from a graceless lad in the fourth year whose form master repeated it in the staff-room) “The Old Python has done a bunk with the boodle.” ’

‘Could there be any substance in such an opinion, sir?’

‘From what I know of Pythias, there is not a miserable milligram of weight in it, and I cautioned the staff about retailing jokes of that kind. Still, there it is. These things are bound to be said when a man disappears without leaving any tracks and was carrying a considerable amount of ready cash. Some of the money was in the form of cheques, but quite a lot was in big coarse banknotes. I told Pythias at the time that, if only he’d mentioned the matter, I would have found somebody to take on his dinner duty or seen to it myself so that he could

get to the bank that Friday morning, but he said he hadn't thought of it and that the money would be put away safely.'

'So he didn't seem perturbed to have a large sum of money, some of it easily negotiable, in his charge?'

'Lord, no. He said he had only got to bung it in a night safe as soon as he'd had his tea and I'm sure that's what he intended to do. He said Mrs Buxton — that's his landlady — didn't like him to keep tea waiting, as she always cooked him a bit of fish on Friday evenings, so he would go home to tea and then park the cash.'

'So you talked to him quite a bit, sir, on that breaking-up Friday afternoon?'

'Only casually, during the afternoon break. There were the usual jokes from the others to the effect that he would be worth robbing, of course, but there was nothing in that.'

'And he seemed perfectly normal, so far as you could judge?'

'Oh, yes, absolutely normal. Just smiled at the jokes, that's all.'

'Was he popular with the boys, sir?'

'Neither popular nor unpopular, like most of us. He was an experienced teacher and nobody took any liberties, but I don't think the boys either liked or disliked him; they simply accepted him for what he was, a man capable of doing his job and getting them through their exams.'

'And the staff, sir?'

'Much the same. He had no close friends on the staff, but I'm sure he had never got up against anybody. He wasn't the quarrelsome type.'

'You wouldn't know anything about the friends he proposed to visit for Christmas, sir?'

'Not a thing. We're a friendly, co-operative lot in the staffroom, but we know almost nothing of one another's private lives. Wives turn up to the school play and on sports days and are introduced to the rest of the staff or not, as the case may be and as opportunity offers — which isn't often, because we are all so busy on these occasions. I imagine it's the same at most schools — friendly atmosphere in the staffroom, but little or no contact once we're off the premises.'

'And I have little opportunity, either,' said the headmaster, 'to meet the staff's visitors. There are always the mayor and mayoress and, of course, the hordes of parents, who, like the poor in the Bible, are always with us, especially on these occasions.'

'Well, if that's all Mr Burke can tell us... ' said the inspector.

'Afraid it is,' said Burke. 'Anything more, Headmaster?'

‘Oh, no, no. Sorry to have interrupted your lesson.’ When Burke had gone, Mr Ronsonby said to the inspector that he hoped ‘this worrying business’ could be kept dark, at any rate for the time being, ‘There is no problem about the money,’ he said, ‘It will be made good. I hope, therefore, that it won’t be necessary to put emphasis on Pythias’s disappearance.’

‘You can rely upon *our* discretion, sir, but I can’t go bail for the press. Somebody will have leaked things to them, I’m afraid. There is bound to be speculation among your scholars, too, and that will soon reach the parents.’

‘Perhaps I can find a way of dealing with that situation. I will make an announcement at tomorrow’s assembly that Pythias is ill, but that I fully expect him to be back in school before the end of term. Surely we shall know something about him by then.’

‘It’s to be hoped so, sir. We shall do our best to trace his movements after he left his lodgings last December, but it may be a long job unless we strike lucky, especially as you want to avoid publicity as much as possible.’

‘Gone missing, with all that money on him?’ said the sergeant who had accompanied Routh. ‘Looks a pretty open case to me, sir, though we could hardly say so to the headmaster.’

‘I know, nor he to us. We couldn’t expect a headmaster to foul his own nest, but the man and the money have both disappeared and there’s been no report of any violence. I think you had better go round and lean on that landlady. She knows more than she’s said, I’ll be bound. There’s a husband. Find out where he was and what he was doing on that Friday night. His wife told me he works as a van man for Foster’s the furniture removers. Later on we may have to see what *they*’ve got to say about him.’

‘There were some cheques as well as money, it seems, sir. Wonder whether they were made out to the tour people or to Pythias himself?’

‘Good point. I’ll get on to the teachers who were going on the trip. They will have paid by cheque, no doubt. As for finding the chap, my opinion is that he’s probably in Greece by now. For a man with money and a passport and, as far as we know, no ties, it’s the simplest of matters to disappear. More than three weeks have gone by since the fellow was last seen by anybody who knew him. The trail is dead cold.’

‘A good many people knew about this expedition, sir, and that Pythias had the money.’

‘If he’s as honest as he is supposed to be, I can’t think why, if he couldn’t get to the bank himself on that Friday, he didn’t ask one of the other masters to pay

in for him. Surely one of those who had paid up for the trip would have done him that much of a favour, if only to make sure that his own contribution was safe. It looks very bad indeed for Pythias, I'd say. I'm pretty certain in my own mind that, underneath all this loyalty to a member of his staff, that headmaster thinks as we do.'

'You mean that Pythias has cut his stick and taken the money with him? I don't believe there is any other reasonable way to look at it, but is there any chance the head will admit that's what he thinks, sir?'

'I doubt it. It isn't so much Pythias as the good name of the school which is involved. Well, we'll make a few enquiries, but if nobody will make a move to charge Pythias, or his body doesn't turn up, or the man himself with a complaint of being mugged, there isn't a lot we can do. All we know for certain is that he had the money and both he and the cash have disappeared.'

'I certainly think the Buxtons need leaning on, sir.'

'Well, have a try, but don't go too far. We have never had any complaints about the woman from any tenants of hers or from any of her neighbours. It's a perfectly respectable boarding-house and has been going for years. Oh, well, you go and have a word with her. I'm going back to the school. They won't be expecting me again so soon, and an element of surprise is often effective. I'm going to sort out some of the masters who opted to go on this trip to Greece and see whether I can't turn up a lead from one or other of them.'

This tactic met with little success. The only morsel of information which seemed to offer Routh any kind of a lead came from the junior geography master who, because he and Pythias shared the same subject, was not only going on the tour to Athens, but was in closer touch with Pythias than was any other member of the staff — although, as he himself admitted, that was not saying very much.

What his information amounted to was that Pythias had mentioned no plans to leave his bedsitter at Mrs Buxton's house to stay with friends, either on that breaking-up Friday or on the following Monday, the day Mrs Buxton asserted that she had expected him to go on holiday for Christmas.

'He told me he expected to get in some indoor putting practice to improve his game, that's all,' said the young schoolmaster, 'but had not really decided. It sounded more like staying at his digs to me.' Routh went back to his office and waited for his sergeant's report on the visit to Mrs Buxton.

'Buxton wasn't home from work,' said Detective-Sergeant Bennett, 'but we don't need him at present, so far as I can see, sir, because, according to his wife, he wasn't home when Pythias took himself off that Friday night.'

‘No, we don’t need him yet, if we need him at all. I’ve just heard, though, that Pythias wasn’t expecting to leave his digs for Christmas, so either he had a worse row with Mrs Buxton than we know about or else he was lying to that young colleague of his and was deliberately laying a false trail about his movements, both to his colleague and to Mrs Buxton. I’m going to that house again and I’m going to find one of the lodgers — more than one, if I can manage it — who saw Pythias go out on that Friday night and can give me some idea of what time it was. Then it will be hard if we can’t turn up somebody who saw him in the street or at the railway station or somewhere. I don’t like all this double talk he seems to have indulged in. It sounds mighty suspicious to me, with all that money involved.’

4

Parade of Tenants



Mrs Buxton's gentlemen lodgers were not very pleased to find themselves of interest to the police. Routh handled them gently since, so far as he knew, he had nothing against any of them. His immediate concern was to find somebody who had seen Pythias leave the house on that Friday evening and then to find somebody else who could confirm the time when this had happened and, if possible, a witness who had passed him in the street or seen him take a train or bus.

The police, although they never publicised the fact, had a list of all landladies who let rooms to more than one lodger, so Routh's first self-imposed task was to fill in a little of the background from which these lodgers had emerged or against which they now functioned.

Mrs Buxton had six bedsitters to let, so now, without Pythias, she had five tenants. The two attics were let cheaply as a bedroom and a studio to Mrs Buxton's nephew, an artist named Rattock. There was nothing but a loft ladder to the attics and as they housed the hot-water tank, which insisted upon making itself heard, often in the middle of the night, Rattock's rent was low and not only for reasons of family sentiment. No other tenant wanted to live in the attic. According to Mrs Buxton, it was Rattock who had seen Pythias leave the house.

Routh was not impressed by the man. Rattock struck him as a worthless layabout who was probably living on his aunt's charity. In this he did the artist an injustice and awarded Mrs Buxton a guerdon she did not merit. Rattock's rent was certainly very low, but it represented pure profit for Mrs Buxton, since she could not have let the draughty, noisy, uncomfortable attics to anybody else. Moreover, although he made very little money from his paintings, he spent fine summer days each year at a neighbouring watering-place where he had become a familiar figure as a pavement artist. Here he made enough money out of the holiday visitors to pay for his food and to cover his very modest rent. He also made enough to buy his canvases and paints and the other materials he needed

for his studio work.

Routh interviewed him first because he was the only one of the tenants at home when the inspector called. Mrs Buxton, flustered by a further visit from the police, announced this and said that Routh had better have her private sitting room for the interview.

‘Not as he’ll be able to tell you anything about poor Mr Pythias,’ she said, ‘for, beyond passing good-evenings at supper-time, you couldn’t hardly say they knew each other. Anyway, Lionel hated school and the very fact that poor Mr Pythias was a schoolmaster would have meant Lionel didn’t have any very friendly feelings towards him.’

The Buxtons themselves kept house in the basement, and Pythias had rented a room on the ground floor. This was next door to a sitting room which Mrs Buxton retained for her own use. When she entertained, which was seldom, parties were held in it, and every Friday evening she sat in state there to collect her weekly dues from her tenants. Except for the short time that the rent-collecting covered, Pythias had enjoyed the privilege of having the ground floor to himself.

The first floor was shared by two tenants in adjoining rooms. One of these was a bird of passage. His name was Durswell and he travelled for a firm which specialised in labour-saving gadgets for the housewife. He returned to his lodgings only intermittently, therefore, since he was often ‘on the road’. Routh knew a little more about him than Mrs Buxton did. He was paying alimony to a divorced wife living elsewhere in the country and he had been county-courted for non-payment. He also contributed to the support of a woman and two children who lived in Wigan.

In the room next door lived a younger man named Cummings. He worked as a meter reader for the Electricity Board and supplemented his wages by working on Friday and Saturday evenings as a barman at the local pub. He was saving up to get married and he wanted to put down the deposit for a mortgage on a bungalow.

On the second floor were two very different characters. Both were bachelors, Peters from choice, Murch because he had his eye on the bank manager’s daughter and knew that he stood little chance until he could contrive, in the old-fashioned phrase, to ‘better himself’. He was a plumber in the employment of a local firm of builders who were putting up small bungalows on an estate outside the town, and his ambition was to get free of the tie of a weekly wage which, in any case, he thought inadequate, considering what his employer charged the

customers who called in a plumber, and set up in business for himself. Meanwhile he entertained the bank manager's daughter in the style to which he supposed she was accustomed and was often hard put to it to pay even the second-floor rent demanded by Mrs Buxton.

Peters came into a different category. He had taken a second-floor room on the understanding that, if a better apartment became vacant, he should be given the first refusal of it. He was employed at the town hall as assistant to the town clerk and most of his spare time was spent in a study of the law, as, although he had no ambition to succeed his chief, he liked to be called into consultation and to air his views.

He had said once to Cummings, when he learned one evening at the communal supper table that the latter was saving with a building society for the money to put down on a bungalow, 'Why don't you put your name on our housing list for a council flat? I daresay I could get you preferential treatment, my position being what it is.'

'Nice of you to offer,' said Cummings, 'but my young lady has her heart set on one of the bungalows we're building out on the Thorne Estate. Says she knows the taps will run and the chain pull if Murch here has a hand in the doings.' The two young men exchanged grins.

'Oh, just as you like,' said Peters somewhat huffily. 'If you change your mind my offer is still open, of course.'

When Pythias's disappearance was confirmed, Peters approached Mrs Buxton. She had thrown out hints in his direction to the effect that she was ready and willing for him to change his second-floor room for the vastly superior bedsitter on the ground floor, but Peters had thought it better to defer the change until it was certain that Pythias was not coming back.

'Oh, well, perhaps you're right,' said Mrs Buxton, who regarded him as the most superior of her tenants and treated him accordingly. 'I can't afford to leave the room empty for long, though, Mr Peters. When the time comes, I'll offer it on a weekly basis, one week's notice to be given on either side. Would that suit you?'

'Oh, admirably, Mrs Buxton. It is only that I should not relish having to move out of the room if Mr Pythias resumed his option on it. I take it that his lease has not run out.'

'Not so long as he pays the rent he will owe me if he *does* come back,' said Mrs Buxton, 'but my thought, Mr Peters, is as he won't. I think he took umbrage, and foreigners are funny like that.'

Routh's questions were much the same to each tenant. He took the answers back with him to the police station and consulted with his chief.

'They've all got much the same story, sir. Only one of them claims to have been at home when Pythias would have got back from school. The landlady gave me the time for that because he was a bit later than usual and she was cooking him something for his tea, so she kept her eye on the clock. After tea they had their little argy-bargy about the money in his briefcase and he paid his week's rent and took himself off.'

'Which one was at home when Pythias got in?'

'The landlady's nephew. He's a bit of a down-and-out, I fancy. Lives in the attic for a peppercorn rent and says he *didn't* see Pythias that Friday evening, but that he must have been in when Pythias arrived from school, for the simple reason that he'd been indoors painting all day — claims to be something of an artist — and hadn't left the house. May be very short of money, but it's fair to say he may not be the only one of the tenants who's a bit skint. Funny Mrs Buxton saying he told her he saw Pythias leave the house. He swears he said nothing of the sort, only that he heard the front door slam.'

'What sort of things did you ask the others?'

'Oh, only routine stuff at this stage. "When did you last see Pythias? Was he friendly, standoffish, easy to get on with? Do you know of any problems he had — marital, financial, difficulties at his school? How well would you say you knew him? Were you surprised when you heard he had left his digs without notice?" — those sort of obvious questions.'

'What about them as individuals? We've never had any complaints, either from them or from the landlady.'

Routh produced his notebook.

'I didn't fancy Rattock overmuch and we know that Durswell was brought to court for non-payment of alimony and collected an attachment order. No further complaints from the ex-wife, so far as I know, but he may be a bit stretched for money because I believe he has to subsidise another little nest in Wigan. The others seem all right, although one of them is keen to buy a house and get married and another has ambitions to start his own plumbing business. Either of them might be glad of Pythias's suitcase hoard, and so might Rattock, of course.'

'As to reactions to Pythias himself, the general opinion is that he was quiet and inoffensive, but kept himself very much to himself. He met the others at supper on the first four evenings of the working week, but supper isn't provided on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays, so there is no getting-together on those

evenings.’

‘Mrs Buxton seems to have her own way of doing things and is maybe a bit of a martinet. Still, it’s probably better that way.’

‘Her rules are strict. If they want companionship or entertainment, they get it outside her premises. There certainly don’t seem to be any one-to-one friendships among her lodgers, but no disagreements, either. As to a lurid sunset painted on Pythias’s wall, I wouldn’t want to live with it myself. Perhaps it reminded Pythias of sunsets in Greece. It’s a splashing great eyeful of a daub which, to my mind, quite spoils an otherwise very good room.’

‘I didn’t know you were an art critic. What did these lodgers actually say?’

‘Young Murch said,’ replied Routh, referring to his notebook, ‘ “Some years ago, when we were still at the Old School, I was in Pythias’s form, so I rather side-stepped him in private life. No, I didn’t exactly dislike him, but I didn’t like him much either. Oh, yes, as a master he was quite fair, I suppose, but he had a habit of doing most of his teaching from the back of the class, so there was no bonus in being in the back row. He used to creep up and down the gangways when we were map-making or tabulating things and you would suddenly feel a sharp tweak to your hair and hear him say, ‘Imbecile! Can you not even *copy* correctly?’ Then he’d stick you in detention and make you do whatever it was all over again. Mind you, it made us a lot more careful next time he set us some work to do. He was mean about marks, too. I don’t believe I ever got more than a C plus from him, no matter how hard I tried.” ’

‘Well,’ Routh went on, ‘that’s beside the point, sir. Anyway, I asked the lad when he had last seen Pythias. He said it must have been on the Thursday, the day before Pythias took himself off. “I came home a bit early on the Thursday to get washed and changed because I was taking a girl out that evening,” he said, “and I believe I remember hearing Pythias asking Ma Buxton what there was going to be for supper. He was always a bit finicky about what he ate and, if he hadn’t been the ground-floor tenant and very quiet and soft-spoken as well, it’s my belief that Ma would have told him to leave if he wasn’t satisfied with the food. She is very proud of her catering.” ’

‘So none of them could tell you anything useful?’ said the Detective-Superintendent.

‘Not really, sir. Peters, in reply to my question as to how he got on with Pythias, said, “I suppose he had the most stable job of any of the residents except myself, and I respected him accordingly. It is almost impossible to get a teacher or a prominent member of the town-hall staff dismissed, whereas all the other

tenants were, to some extent, vulnerable.” ’

‘I picked him up on this, sir, and asked him whether he had any reason to suppose that Mr Pythias was in danger of being dismissed from his teaching post and so had chosen to leave of his own accord before that happened, but Peters was emphatic in declaring that he had no reason for thinking anything of the kind.

‘ “I have the confidence of the chairman of the education committee,” he said, “and there has never been a word of criticism against his teaching or his discipline.” I asked him whether there was a woman mixed up in the disappearance. He said one never knew about that sort of thing, but that, so far as he knew, Pythias seldom went out in the evenings and was never absent from his digs except for taking an occasional holiday abroad. “It was news to me when I heard he had friends to stay with at Christmas,” he said, “and I only heard that after he left here.” ’

‘What about the Buxtons?’ asked the Detective-Superintendent. ‘Buxton is a van driver for those furniture dealers in the high street, isn’t he?’

‘That’s right, sir. I’ve been round there. They’ve nothing against Buxton. Been working for them for the past six years. He told me that he leaves his van at the warehouse most evenings, but on Fridays he parks it in his own drive so that he can get away first thing on Saturday morning and get through his work by midday so as to get to football. He’s a Southampton fan and never misses a home match.’

‘So his van was probably parked in his own drive on the evening when Pythias walked off. What did any of the others have to say?’

‘Nothing which seemed of any importance or help, sir. Except for Rattock, they declare they were not at home when Pythias left and all he can say is that he thinks he heard the front door slam at round about seven o’clock, but, of course, that need not have been Pythias leaving. I pressed him, but he declared he had seen nothing of Pythias that Friday evening. “As I’ve told you,” he said, “my aunt provides a high tea on Fridays for those who come in. Not everybody does, you see, so she has ascertained at breakfast who she is to expect and who not. She is a very hard-working, capable woman and the digs here are excellent. If you get the opportunity, I wish you would tell her I said so.”

‘ “Are you behind with your rent, then, Mr Rattock?” I asked him. “Do you want me to butter her up?”

‘ “Dear me! How cynical you policement are! Of course I’m not behind with my rent — well, only a week, and we’re allowed one week’s grace unless my

aunt has a strong reason for wanting to get rid of anybody.'

' "So you saw Pythias neither come nor go on that Friday evening?" I said.

' "I may have heard the front door slam at about seven, as I've already told you," he said, "but that need not have been Pythias, as you and I have agreed. It could have been one of the others coming in or going out, couldn't it?" '

Routh emphasised there had been nothing more to be obtained from the lodgers, though there still remained the Buxtons themselves.

'If only Ronsonby would come out with what he really thinks, which is that Pythias has skipped with the journey money, we should know where we are,' Routh said to Sergeant Bennett.

'It's a very unlikely thing for a schoolmaster to do, sir, especially one as well established as Pythias seems to have been. Do we know what the money would have mounted up to?'

'More or less. It's a package tour by air both ways and the cheap fares operate until the end of June. Ronsonby says that the adult fares are a hundred and fifty-three and the boys have to pay eighty. Thirteen adult fares are in question, as three of the six masters go free. Ten parents are going and sixty boys. Working that out, Pythias seems to have had something round about seven thousand pounds in his briefcase that Friday evening.'

'Nice sugar, sir, but surely not worth risking his job and his pension for, unless he had a very urgent need to lay his hands on some ready cash. So far, we've no evidence that he had such a need. You seem to have lined up one or two people who *might* be glad of a bit of extra money, sir, and I don't only mean the chap who occupies the attic.'

'You're right there. Then there's Buxton himself. A van driver has opportunities, if you know what I mean, that are denied to the nine-to-five office blokes. All those jokes about the milkman apply equally well to any long-distance driver. I was told at the furniture dealers that they deliver as far away as Yorkshire and Durham, or anywhere else on the English mainland if they get an order for goods or a removal. There must be lots of nights when Buxton doesn't sleep at home.'

'That would apply equally well to the chap who travels in household appliances, sir.'

'Yes, and he is a fellow who has to keep two homes going. Somehow I have a feeling that there's something more credible behind the disappearance of Pythias than that he's absconded with the money. On the face of it, he and Peters are the last among those tenants who rather desperately need some extra cash.'

The interview with Buxton took place at the police station. Routh arranged this as a piece of gamesmanship, hoping to alarm the man into admitting something which might be of use to the police, for Routh had come to the conclusion that a crime *had* been committed and that Pythias was the victim not the perpetrator of it.

He admitted to himself that, in the face of such evidence as he had, this was an illogical conclusion, but, although he had never been called upon before to investigate a serious crime, he had become adept at summing up the petty criminals who had been brought to his notice and he already distrusted Rattock, Buxton and Durswell and had taken a personal dislike (which he did his best to discount) to the rather unctuous Peters of the town-hall staff.

Buxton turned up at the police station in the blustering mood which Routh had expected and expressed himself freely.

‘Look, what the hell is all this?’ he said. ‘My employers aren’t going to like me having to come here, you know. I got my job to think about. My job’s depending on my good name. I got a reputation to keep up, haven’t I?’

‘Just a few questions which I didn’t want to ask in front of your wife,’ said Routh.

‘Oh, like that, is it? Well, let me tell *you*, Mr Inspector Nosey, as I don’t have no women in bed on the sly. I got another chap on the van with me, haven’t I? Have to, with beds and wardrobes and sideboards and God knows what to lug about. You ask my mate. You ask Bill Watts what I gets up to when we’re on the road. Go on, you ask him.’

Routh got nothing helpful and went back to the house to see Durswell. Mrs Buxton greeted him without joy and asked when this persecution of the innocent was going to cease. Yes, Durswell *was* in, as it happened. She took Routh up to his room. The commercial traveller cordially invited him to have a drink. Routh politely refused and put his first question.

‘You asked me that the last time,’ said Durswell. ‘What did I think when Pythias gave up staying here? And when did I see him last? Well, that would have been on the Friday before the Friday he went off. He offered to take my rent in to Ma, if I wanted to get round to the Dog and Duck. As for t’other, well, I assumed he’d had a bust-up of some sort with Ma Buxton, but I can’t honestly say I thought much about it at all. Got plenty on my own plate without bothering about other people’s problems. I’m not here all that often, anyway, so I don’t know much about the other chaps.’

‘Do you mean that from the time you and he met when he offered to hand in

your rent, you have never seen him again?’

‘That’s right, like I told you before. For one thing, I was not in for supper all the next week and, by the time I *did* come back here, he was gone. After supper, by the time I got in those nights, everybody had gone to his own pad or to the Dog and Duck for a drink, so you wouldn’t expect me to see anybody if I got in after about nine-thirty.’

Peters, the town-hall employee, questioned along the same lines, repeated his former assertions. He remembered the Friday in question for a particular reason. The mayor’s Christmas party to the councillors was looming and it had come to Peters’s notice — he did not explain how — that the mayoral drinks cupboard was in need of replenishment. At four o’clock, therefore, he had telephoned the only off-licence in the town to ask that replacements should be sent up forthwith.

‘So I had to wait at the town hall for them,’ he explained, ‘and that made me later than usual in getting home. Still, I had telephoned Mrs Buxton to tell her that I should be kept. She serves individual high teas instead of a sit-down supper on Fridays, as you have been informed, I believe. Mine is always bacon and sausages and I did not want to be presented with a dried-up plateful which had been kept hot in the oven. Anyhow, Pythias must have left the house before I got in. He was not there to pay his rent, so I suppose he had settled before he left. The last time I saw him? Well, I suppose it would have been at supper on the Thursday, wouldn’t it? I am sure he would have left the house before I got back on the Friday. I not only had to wait for the off-licence — they were very late with the delivery because they were inundated with Christmas orders — but I then had to see to the proper stowage of the bottles and sign a chit for them.’

‘What kind of man was Pythias? It is quite beyond me to say. We all had our private quarters and there was never very much conversation at supper-time. Hungry, tired men are not given to loquacity at meal-times. He was quiet and a member of a respectable profession, but, of course, it would hardly do for an official in my position to become too friendly with one of the council’s schoolmasters.’

‘Oh, why not?’ asked Routh, who, with a lapse into unprofessional bias, was again finding Peters somewhat insufferable. ‘A proper Uriah Heap’ was the way he described him to Sergeant Bennett.

‘Jockeying for preferment, corruption, undue influence with regard to obtaining headships — you would be surprised, Inspector, at what people will stoop to. Was I surprised when Pythias did not come back to this house? Neither surprised nor the reverse. It made no difference whatever to my life-style and

anyhow it was no business of mine. I have learnt in my journey through this uncertain world where traps and stratagems await the unwary, that to mind one's own business and nobody else's is the secret of a successful and problem-free career. I hope you agree.'

Routh toyed with the idea of having another go at the artist in the attic, but thought it was an interview which would keep.

5

Hounds in Leash



There have been developments, sir,' said Detective-Sergeant Bennett a day or two later.

'Wish I could say the same,' said Routh. 'Tell me.'

'I went round to the lodgings again, as you suggested I should, but the day before I got there Mrs Buxton had had visitors. They came to collect the gear Pythias left behind him.'

'She didn't let them have it?'

'Yes, she did, sir. They brought a note signed by Pythias authorising them to take the stuff — clothes she said it was, and a bag of golf-clubs — and she swears she recognised the writing and the signature. She showed me a letter she had from Pythias when he was on holiday last year.'

'Did she also show you the letter these people brought?'

'No. They had taken it away with them.'

'Then her claim that she recognised the writing doesn't help us at all. She ought to have insisted on keeping the note to cover herself for parting with Pythias's property. Oh, well, it looks as though he's alive all right. Did she get any clue as to where he is?'

'Yes. He's ill at these people's place in Springdale.'

'Did they give her any idea as to when he proposes to return to his digs?'

'No, sir. According to what she told me, these people said that he thought Mrs Buxton might like to know that she could let his room for the time being. That's why he had asked to have all his possessions removed out of the way. They took the clothes, the golf-clubs and a suitcase.'

'He could have paid a retaining fee if he intended to come back. It seems a bit rash to pass up on good digs for what may be a short illness. Once his room is let, he may not find it easy to get back.'

'Mrs Buxton is prepared to let it, but only from week to week. She says he has considered her, so she is prepared to consider him.'

‘All very nice and hotsy-totsy. You know what I think? I think Pythias has cut his stick after all and taken the money with him. Either that, or these two people who called on Mrs Buxton are criminals and have done for him and collected the boodle for themselves, but my first theory now seems more likely.’

‘Springdale is on the other side of the county, sir. Would people living there have known anything about the money for the Sir George Etherege school journey? I doubt it.’

‘Did you get a description of them?’

‘She said they were a swarthy man, younger than Pythias, and a good-looking young woman. She thinks they were foreigners.’

‘Not unlikely. Pythias is a Greek.’

‘The man was wearing a good overcoat with an astrakhan collar and he had a little round hat such as the Russians favour. The girl had on a musquash coat — real fur, Mrs Buxton thinks, not synthetic — and fancy knee-high boots.’

‘They sound a fishy couple to me. They could have stepped out of any romantic spy story. I hope Mrs Buxton wasn’t drawing on her imagination. If so, she is implicated. Anyway, I don’t like the sound of them, but perhaps I’m prejudiced. I don’t like astrakhan collars and Russian headgear and women in knee-high boots.’

‘All Englishmen are prejudiced against foreigners, sir. It’s partly because we’re islanders and partly because we’ve got a superiority complex.’

‘Both have come in very handy in the past. Well, nothing more we can do tonight. I’d like to give Mrs Buxton a rocket, but what good would it do?’

‘I could go round there and catch Buxton when he gets home from work, sir, and see what he’s got to say.’

‘It wouldn’t help. He won’t have seen these foreigners. He’s got his own job, so it seems that Mrs Buxton runs the lodgings without his help. I’ll report to Mr Ronsonby tomorrow morning and point out that it isn’t likely that Mr Pythias can still be listed as a missing person. Nothing else helpful, I suppose?’

‘No, sir. Mrs Buxton showed me this letter written to her by Pythias when he was on summer holiday a year ago, as I mentioned. Why she should think it would bolster up her claim that she recognised the writing and the signature on the note those visitors brought I don’t understand any more than you do, but women are not the most logical of creatures. It may have convinced *her*, but, without the other letter for comparison, it could hardly convince anybody else.’

‘I wonder why she had kept the holiday letter? It was dated some time back, you say. Landladies are seldom sentimental enough to preserve their lodgers’

holiday correspondence.'

'As to that, sir, she had kept it because on the inside page there was a nice little sketch of some Greek fishing boats in the harbour of one of the islands. He was staying in the place for his holiday, the letter said. She said it was a shame to throw the drawing away, and I must admit I agreed with her. I don't know much about art, but I would say that this was a very classy little drawing indeed.'

'And doesn't tally with that awful daub on his wall. So this picture was just sketched as an illustration to an ordinary holiday letter? I should like to see it. Go back and chisel it out of her. If Pythias is that much of an artist, he may have had a tie-up with that nephew of Mrs Buxton's.'

'Or with the art master at the school, sir, don't you think?'

'From what I've gathered, Pythias had no particular pals on the staff. I think the tie-up with Rattock at the digs is more likely. Anyway, get that letter from Mrs Buxton. We may be able to do with a specimen of Pythias's handwriting later on. One never knows. Besides, I'd like to show that sketch to Rattock and see whether there are any reactions.'

'I expect Mrs Buxton showed it to him when she received the letter, sir, knowing Rattock to be an artist himself.'

'That's true, but I shall have a go at him, all the same. It may rattle him if he thinks I find the letter important. By the way, you mentioned that these people took away clothes and golf-clubs. When I got her to show me the room there was a fair collection of books. Didn't those get taken away as well?'

'She only spoke of clothes, the golf-clubs and a suitcase. Perhaps a woman of her sort wouldn't think books worth mentioning, sir.'

'Oh, well, I think I'll have another look at the room. If the books are still there, things look very fishy indeed. If Pythias intended not to go back there, well, he's a schoolmaster and would never have left his books behind. You know what I think, Bennett? I think that worthless nephew has had the stuff and flogged it, and Mrs Buxton is covering up for him and has invented these astrakhan and fur-coat visitors. Still, we can't ignore the Springdale angle, in case she is telling the truth. After all, Pythias is a Greek and may well have had foreign friends. I wonder whether the neighbours can tell us anything about the time Pythias left the house that Friday evening? He seems to have been all right then and also quite in health while he was at school. Those visitors still sound damned fishy to me. We'll try tackling the neighbours, don't you think?'

'I doubt whether the neighbours saw anything, either of Pythias or those visitors, sir. The houses along there are all old Victorian family residences set in

big gardens and widely-spaced from one another, and there are matured trees and shrubberies in all the gardens.'

'That's true, and on the other side of the road is the park, so the houses can't be overlooked from across the street. This time of the year the park closes at half-four, anyway, so there wouldn't have been any loiterers, even if we could trace them. Oh, well, it's no part of our job to trace people who simply choose to disappear. If it were, we should be having nothing to do but get on the trail of missing husbands. If only Ronsonby would accuse Pythias we could take action, but he prefers to keep the good name of the school intact, it seems, and put up the money himself.'

That this was the case Mr Ronsonby demonstrated on the following morning when, the assembly hymn and prayer having been got out of the way, he addressed the whole school.

'I know you will all be sorry to hear that Mr Pythias was taken seriously ill during the Christmas holidays. There is every hope that he will be with us again by next term. Whether he will be fit enough to lead the expedition to Greece we do not, of course, yet know, but, if he cannot do so, there will be others to take his place and see that all the arrangements are carried out just as Mr Pythias has planned them.'

The head boy accompanied him to his room.

'Could the school send a card and some flowers, sir?'

This artless question put Mr Ronsonby in a quandary. It was impossible to tell the boy that he had no idea of where to locate Mr Pythias. He hedged in diplomatic fashion.

'It is a kind thought, Hobson, but I think it might be better to wait a bit until Mr Pythias is in a fit state to appreciate it. He is extremely ill at present. Make it a celebration of his convalescence, eh?'

His next caller was Margaret Wirrell. She had news to impart. A number of cheques had been sent to the bank in an envelope postmarked Springdale. They were all made out to the special journey fund. The bank had just rung to say so. No covering letter and no paying-in slip had come with the cheques, but the signatures were genuine and had been compared with those of the bank's customers whose names they bore. Among them were the names of three masters, Mr Scaife, Mr Marmont and Mr Whitby.

'The bank,' said Margaret, 'are a bit puzzled. They ask whether the three masters could make it convenient to call in and verify that the cheques signed by them are genuine. They have no reason to think otherwise, but would like to be

sure.'

The three young men called at the bank during their dinner-hour. They and the rest of the staff were well known there, since their salaries were paid direct to the bank and there they had to apply to get their money out. The cheques were genuine enough. Scaife asked where the rest of the tour money was.

'I know some of my boys brought ten and twenty-pound notes and fivers,' he said. However, apart from the cheques, the bank had received no other tour funds.

Having received the report just before afternoon school, Mr Ronsonby thought he had better get in contact again with the police.

'It's so extraordinary,' he said to Mr Burke. 'I don't understand it at all.'

'Well, at least we know where Pythias is,' said Burke. 'The people where he's staying may not have liked the idea of sending treasury notes through the post.'

'They could have enclosed a slip with the cheques to say so. Well, I'm going to let the police sort it out. They are far more able to track down these people than we are. I am not normally a suspicious man, but I feel there is something extremely odd about this whole business and I cannot help thinking that, whereas to guilty minds those cheques might appear to be a liability, the rest of the money would be readily negotiable and could not be traced very easily.'

Nothing had been said to the three schoolmasters about keeping dark the reason for their visit to the bank, so, before afternoon classes began, the staffroom was buzzing with gossip and speculation.

'I wondered whether we were going to be charged with forgery,' said Scaife.

'I felt like a shoplifter,' said Marmont, a red-haired young man who taught history.

'The only forger on this staff would be Pythias,' said a middle-aged man of mild aspect. At the sound of this name the exchanges became more animated.

'Pythias?' said Whitby. 'So that's the nigger in the woodpile, is it? He's paid in our cheques, but the bank, for some reason, wasn't satisfied. Well, they are now, I hope. We had our chequebooks on us, of course, so we were able to match the counterfoils against the cheques they showed us, as well as verifying our signatures.'

'And emerged from the ordeal without a stain on your characters,' said Phillips, the only master who kept his hair touching his shirt collar. This poetic affectation was tolerated by Mr Ronsonby because Phillips was not only an intolerant, fiery, rather red Welshman, but a brilliant musician and teacher whom

the easy-going headmaster was wary of upsetting.

‘So all’s well that ends well,’ said Mr Burke.

‘Not by a long chalk it isn’t,’ said Scaife. ‘This here is what Marmont calls “one of the myst’ries of ’istory”. There’s something very peculiar about this continuous absence of Pythias from our midst. I’ll tell you something you may not know. Once or twice I’ve looked out of my window and spotted a plain-clothes Robert coming up the drive.’

‘Shouldn’t be looking out of windows when you’re supposed to be teaching maths, my lad,’ said Whitby, with mock severity.

‘It’s only to rest my fevered brow against the cool glass when Jenkins can’t give me the factors of x squared minus y squared. Anyway, I recognised this ornament of the Fuzz because he once gave evidence against me for speeding. He was in the uniformed branch then, so I suppose my case helped towards his promotion.’

‘I’ve always thought there was something fishy about Pythias,’ said another master. ‘Beware of the Greeks, you know.’

‘Only when they come bearing gifts,’ said Marmont, ‘and the Old Python could hardly be credited with doing that. Nobody likes coughing up the coffee and tea money — personally, I think these beverages ought to be provided free — but our Rule Britannia in the secretary’s den has more trouble digging his weekly contribution out of Pythias than out of the rest of us put together.’

‘Wonder how much Pythias is making out of this Athenian caper?’ said another man. ‘Merely a flippant and facetious observation,’ he added hastily, as he met Mr Burke’s cold eye.

‘Then keep the next one under your hat,’ advised the deputy head. ‘There’s the bell.’

‘You know,’ said Scaife to Marmont as they picked up their books and went out into the corridor, ‘I know where Pythias has his digs. I’ve a damn good mind to oil round there after school and make some enquiries about the bloke. I don’t like being summoned to the bank as though I’ve bounced a cheque on them.’

‘Forget it,’ said his friend. ‘Fools rush in, and all that, remember. If the police are interested, well, it’s better for the likes of us to stay clear.’

‘I said I’d spotted this detective chap coming up to the school. I didn’t say it was anything to do with Pythias. It’s probably something to do with the builder’s men.’

‘I wish such-and-such to Pythias, anyway!’ said Marmont. ‘This is the second free period this week that I’ve had to stand in for him. Oh, well, they can

draw and use coloured pencils on a map of South America while I'm getting on with my marking. My knowledge of geography is limited to where the English and Scottish golf-courses are.'

'I thought history and geography were complementary subjects.'

'Nonsense, my dear fellow. As Edmund Clerihew Bentley has so succinctly pointed out, geography is about maps and history is about chaps. There could not be a greater distinction drawn. Oh, well, see you at break, should we both live that long.'

'What was that crack of yours, Filkins, about Pythias being a forger?' asked Mr Burke.

'Oh, I only said it because Pythias is quite an artist. His maps are the most exquisite things. I wouldn't put it past him to design a five-pound note which would defy detection.'

'You mind what you're saying. There's many a true word spoken in jest and you don't want your nasty nasturtiums brought up against you later. Have mind upon your health, as the Bard says, and tempt providence no further.'

Mr Burke then set his boys to work and went along to confer with the headmaster.

'I've seen Scaife, Marmont and Whitby,' he said. 'The cheques are all right, so no problem there.'

'Yes, but where is the rest of the money?'

'I wonder whether we ought to have warned those three men to keep their mouths shut about being summoned to the bank? The staffroom is a hot-bed of gossip.'

'Yes. I wonder why women are always credited with being the gossiping sex? My wife always declares that men are much worse and she may well be right. Anyway, I don't object to the idea of gossip in the staffroom. It might turn up a bit of useful information. Keep your ear to the ground. I like this business less and less the more I hear about it.'

At the police station Routh and Detective-Sergeant Bennett were also in conference and on the same subject as were the two schoolmasters.

'Nothing wrong with those cheques, it seems,' said Routh, 'but although I have indicated to Mr Ronsonby that there is not much more that we can do, I think we'll go along and take a look round Springdale. I still don't believe that these Greeks actually exist, you know. That was a very women's-novelette description of them that Mrs Buxton gave.'

'You think we've got a murder on our hands, sir? Well, we are not going to

get any help in proving that, unless and until we can find the body.'

'You no longer believe that Pythias defaulted, then?'

'As we've said before, it wouldn't be worth a teacher's while to abscond with that kind of money, sir, a nice little lump sum though it might be. He would risk too much if he were found out. There's his pension, for one thing. From what I've gathered, Mr Pythias isn't all that far from the age of retirement.'

'Isn't — or *wasn't*? I think that's what we've got to find out. I agree with you that murder is more than a possibility. When we've had a look around Springdale, we might do a lot worse than find out what sort of a financial position the Buxtons are in. I don't like the way that woman did not notify the school that Pythias had not returned to his digs. Besides, she certainly knew he was carrying that money. She has admitted that from the beginning.'

'As to the first, she claims that it was no business of hers if he chose to walk out on her. As for the second, would she have volunteered the information that she knew what was in the briefcase if she intended to steal it?'

'Good point, but, of course, by the time we got to her, the deed was done, and if she is guilty, she would have had time to cover her tracks.'

'I reckon these landladies know all the tricks of the trade, sir, when it comes to a bit of deviousness.'

'Perhaps they need to, if they are to keep up-sides with some of the tenants.'

'Those would be women tenants, sir. Men are not devious. They're merely twisters.'

'Anyway, Springdale for me tomorrow. I don't think there is any point in your tagging along. I'll have a beer and a natter with the Super there. We trained together, so he'll tell me anything he can.'

'Anything I can do while you're gone, sir?'

'Unfortunately, no. I don't want to start a scandal until I'm on safer ground. Still, somebody thought those cheques were too hot to handle, so we may get a lead later on.'

'Springdale seems to be the clue, sir. It has been mentioned twice.'

'If this business is as fishy as I think it is, both could be a blind, of course.'

'Buxton drives a furniture van, sir. He can get about all over the country without arousing the slightest suspicion.'

'Yes, I hadn't lost sight of that fact. I think I'll have another word with the Buxtons before I go to Springdale. No, wait a minute. Perhaps you could do that while I'm gone. Lean on Buxton as hard as you can under the regulations and take him all through his story again as to what he did and at what time he got

home on that Friday evening. Oh, and have another crack at that nephew of theirs. I have an idea that he's a nasty bit of work. If he saw a chance of helping himself out of somebody else's pockets, I have a hunch that he'd take it. I don't like artists, anyway. Sleight-of-hand merchants, every one of them.'

'Thou shalt not make any graven image or the likeness of anything? Is that your view, sir?'

'Something of the sort. There's a kind of witchcraft about graven images. Think of Pygmalion. And there is black magic in pictures.'

'So our cave-dwelling ancestors seem to have believed, sir.'

'Not that I'm a fanciful or a superstitious man, of course,' said Routh hastily.

'Of course not, sir, but none of us can altogether control our atavistic instincts.'

Routh regarded his sergeant with surprise.

'Are you attending evening classes at the Sir George Etherege school, by any chance?' he asked.

'No, sir, but I do a lot of reading in any spare time I've got.'

'I must see you have less of it. Can't have you overtaxing that brain of yours.'

Bennett was early at the Buxtons' house next morning. He wanted to catch Buxton before the van driver set off for work. He also thought that an early morning visit to the artist might disconcert that slightly disreputable young man.

From Buxton he got nothing but a mulish adherence to what he had told the police at former interviews. He had worked late, the roads were heavy with traffic and he was sure that Pythias would have left long before he himself reached home. Mrs Buxton confirmed all this so far as her knowledge of it went. She had not actually seen Pythias leave. They had had their little up-and-a-downer about the money in the briefcase, but she had given him his high tea, 'with no ill-feelings on either side, if you understand me', and she felt certain he must have left immediately he had had it. Bennett tackled Rattock once more, but the artist also had nothing to add to his previous story. He was what the sergeant called 'dumb-insolent' and contrived to be extremely irritating.

'The three wise monkeys rolled into one,' said Bennett, when he reported back to Routh later.

6

Labour in Vain



Routh allowed himself an hour and a half to drive to Springdale although, if there were no hold-ups, it was possible, without speeding, to do it in about an hour and ten minutes.

The roads were reasonably clear and he made good time. His appointment with the Superintendent was at ten-thirty, so he pulled up before he entered the town, got out of the car to stretch his legs and looked around him.

Springdale was a town of some considerable size. Its high street went steeply uphill and from where he stood Routh could make out a church spire and another church with a tower, while directly in front of him was a fine old bridge across the river. He had fished the river, although not the reach at which he was looking. It was a pleasant stream bordered by wide, flat meadows and the fishing was mostly barbel, chub and dace, although there were also plenty of pike to be taken with dead bait.

Routh was no believer in the theory that the pike is a sort of devil-fish which, when caught, should be despatched immediately. He followed the theory of that master of coarse fishing the Dorset man Owen Wentworth, always throwing the pike back when he had caught them, just as he did the other coarse fish which came to his rod and line. However, there was no fishing to be done that day. Routh strolled on to the bridge, spent a few pleasant minutes looking down at the flowing water and then returned to the car.

The police station was in the high street and a narrow turning on the left brought him into a fair-sized yard where other police cars were parked. At the front entrance to the building a constable recognised and saluted him, and a moment or two later he was in the Superintendent's office greeting his old friend.

'You were a bit mysterious over the phone,' said Superintendent Bellairs. 'What can we do for you?'

'Find me a couple of Greeks, a man and a woman, who may be nursing

another Greek who was taken ill in their house over Christmas.'

'What's their name?'

'That's the trouble. I don't know.' He gave the Superintendent a short but sufficient account of the disappearance of Pythias and the money, the return of the cheques in an envelope postmarked Springdale and the visit of the two strangers to Pythias's room to collect his belongings.

'Looks an open and shut case to me,' said Bellairs. 'The chap has absconded with the money and the Buxtons suspect that they won't see him again. The Buxtons have invented these two foreigners to cover the fact that they have sold Pythias's clothes and golf-clubs to cover the rent he probably owes them. That fits the facts as you've given them to me, I think.'

'It doesn't cover Mrs Buxton's definite statement that they live here in Springdale and the fact that the cheques were sent to the bank from here. She knew nothing about the Springdale postmark on the envelope that went to the bank, so she didn't get the name of the town from that. I think these two foreigners exist all right.'

'All you need is the local directory, then.'

'The directory may not be much help because, as I say, I can't put a name to these people. I've come to you because I thought you were the likeliest person to put me in touch with any foreigners you've got on your patch. After all, if these people *do* exist, I must get in touch with them.'

'I know of only one foreigner, but he's an Armenian. He's the librarian at the agricultural college here and a very nice chap indeed. I don't suppose for a moment that he'll be able to help you, but I'll take you over there if you like.' He rang through and was told that they would be expected.

The agricultural college was several miles outside the town and even when they reached its gates there was a drive of about a mile and a half before they reached the college building. Here a porter, who obviously had been told to expect them, conducted them up two flights of stairs to a large room furnished with tables and chairs and surrounded on three sides by bookshelves. There were racks for newspapers and periodicals and a railed-off space containing a desk, a chair and a library ladder for the custodian.

This was a slender little man in a neat grey suit and an unobtrusive tie. The noticeable thing about him was his beard. It was spade-shaped and immensely, luxuriantly thick. Mrs Buxton had mentioned the Russian cap and the astrakhan collar of one of her supposedly Greek visitors, but (thought Routh) she could never have missed the beard. Whoever (if he existed at all) her male mysterious

caller could have been, it was certainly not this man. Routh explained his errand. The librarian was polite but puzzled.

‘Greeks?’ he said. ‘There are none among the students and I know of none in the town. Pythias? I have never heard of him except as the legendary friend of Damon.’

‘Well,’ said Bellairs, when they had returned to the car, ‘he is the best I can do for you. We’re very short of foreigners here. No blacks, no Pakis, one or two old-established Jewish families, and now and again the gypsies who camp on the riverside verges and have to be moved on. I think the directory is your only hope unless — yes, there *is* one more chap you might try. Pythias is a schoolmaster, you say, so any close friends of his would likely be more or less literate, I suppose. Let’s try the public library in the town. Paxton, the chief librarian, has a card-index memory for names. If these people use the public library he is bound to know of them, especially as they won’t have English surnames. You can look through the directory there, too, if he can’t help you.’

Again Routh drew a blank.

‘Well, I’m not going to try the post office,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to start up a lot of gossip, especially if these Greeks don’t exist. I haven’t nearly enough to go on to take any action at present, but I agree with you that Mrs Buxton and her husband can bear watching. I have to keep in mind that Buxton is a van driver and could get here very easily to post an envelope.’

‘I doubt whether he’s his own master to any great extent,’ said Bellairs. ‘Wouldn’t his employers keep him to a pretty strict timetable? You will have seen by the postmark when those cheques were sent to the bank. Can’t you check up with the furniture people?’

‘And find out whether Buxton had an assignment to deliver or collect furniture in Springdale at about the right time? Yes, of course I could, but I don’t believe it would help much. What’s forty miles in a van which can bucket along at fifty on open roads? There’s very little congestion on the roads around here until you actually get into the town.’

‘The firm probably checks his mileage and his fuel consumption, don’t you think?’

‘He probably pays for any extra journeys himself. You know, I’m beginning to like the look of things less and less. If Buxton posted those cheques, it means he’s got the rest of the money. If he’s got the money, it can only mean that Pythias is dead. If Pythias is dead, either he was murdered or else he succumbed to a heart attack or something. If he did, and the Buxtons took the banknotes and

the cheques, he must have died in the Buxtons' house and the Buxtons have concealed the death. I'll try the firm and see what comes of that. Of course, Buxton and his van may not have come into the matter at all. Springdale has a railway station. Pythias himself may have posted the cheques and hung on to the rest of the money. I don't suppose he could have hit upon any way of converting the cheques to his own use. They were not made payable to him, but were entered in a special school fund.'

The firm gave Routh no help. They had nothing against Buxton and they had not sent him to deliver any orders in Springdale for nearly a year. They did their best, looked up their order books and all the rest of their delivery records, but came up with no information from which the Detective-Inspector could obtain a clue to Buxton's involvement or any other kind of a lead.

Meanwhile, Mr Ronsonby had been turning over in his mind the matter of the postmark.

'Whatever is still in the dark about Pythias,' he said to Mr Burke, 'one thing is absolutely clear. Those cheques were posted in Springdale, so whoever posted them was in Springdale at the time of posting. It seems to me that this person was most likely to have been Pythias himself. I think I ought to go over there and take a look round. If it was not Pythias, it could have been those Greeks who are said to have called at his lodgings to collect his effects and, if it were not they, it was probably Buxton. He, as we know, has a means of transport which people are so much accustomed to seeing all over the county that it seems hardly noticeable. It is like Poe's letter and Chesterton's postman.'

'Springdale is a biggish town,' said Mr Burke. 'How do you propose to make a start? Do you know anybody there?'

'Yes, of course I do. I propose to enlist the help of Miss Edmunds. She has the big mixed school there and I have met her a number of times at educational gatherings. If there are Greeks living in Springdale, she will know of them.'

'Only if they have children of senior-school age, I would have thought.'

'Well, even if *she* does not know of them, I can depend upon it that some of her pupils will.'

Miss Edmunds's school was aptly named Hillmoor, for it was on top of the hill which led out of the town on the south side. Several acres of moorland had been cleared of heather and gorse, and then levelled and grassed to form playing fields. Sharp bends on a dangerous road which ran down the other side of the hill had been ironed out to make a safe approach to the school, not only for children on bicycles, but for the staff cars and the fleet of school buses. The school

buildings were larger than those of the Sir George Etherege would be, and, in fact (though Mr Ronsonby, driving carefully in at the school gates), Miss Edmunds had gathered for herself an educational plum.

Miss Edmunds, who had been apprised of the visit, although she had not been told its purpose, was waiting to receive Mr Ronsonby in her sanctum. It was as different from his own austere and business-like office as can be imagined. True, it boasted a large desk and a swivel chair, filing cabinets and a timetable which, like his own, covered a considerable part of one wall, but the floor was expensively carpeted in place of the parquet flooring and one solitary rug to which he was accustomed. There were two deep armchairs and there were vases of flowers, the early spring flowers, on a small table and on Miss Edmunds's vast desk.

The really incongruous addition to the room and the one which, in Mr Ronsonby's opinion, detracted from its charm, was a screen rather obviously made by covering an old-fashioned wooden clothes-horse with brown paper. On to the brown paper had been pasted cut-outs of childish art in the form of large, unidentifiable flowers and equally mythological birds. All this futuristic décor was presided over by a couple of angels with hideous faces, flaring nostrils and eyes set so high in their foreheads as almost to meet their hair.

Miss Edmunds saw Mr Ronsonby looking at the screen. She laughed and said, 'Yes, isn't it? But it was a Christmas gift from 2C, so I must keep it until half-term. Then the cleaners will have orders to lose it. Do sit down. To what do I owe the honour? Don't tell me you are trying to enlist support for this tinpot idea the county have put up to us to introduce a non-failure public exam for all the lazy little wretches who could get CSE if they worked instead of fooling around and making nuisances of themselves. I've no patience with soft options and I've told the county so.'

'Nothing like that. I haven't come on school business, exactly, but to ask for your help. The fact is that I am short of my senior geography master and I have reason to think that he may be ill in this town and is being cared for by some Greek friends of his. Have you time to hear the whole story? It has some interesting and slightly mysterious features.'

Miss Edmunds rang a bell and told the secretary who answered it that she was not to be disturbed until she rang again.

'Chase off any parents, publishers' travellers, staff and children who want to see me,' she said. 'I am about to have my blood curdled and I want to enjoy the sensation without having it broken into by school business.' She turned to

Ronsonby. 'Do go on,' she said. So he told her all. She listened without interrupting him. At the end she said, 'So you think this Pythias has absconded and is lying low in this town with these Greek friends of his.'

'Oh, no, no. I have every confidence in his probity. But, having obtained this lead to his possible whereabouts, I feel I must trace the man and find out how he is. Things may look bad in a way, but I refuse to abandon all faith in him.'

'Hm!' said Miss Edmunds. 'Well, my practice is always to believe the worst of everybody. It almost always turns out to be the truth about them.'

'You terrify me!'

'Yes, so I do most of the children and three-quarters of the staff, thank goodness,' said Miss Edmunds complacently. 'Well, where do you want me to begin? I can tell you one thing straight away. I have no children of Greek extraction on my registers.'

'It would have been too much to hope that you had. I wondered, though, whether any of your staff or your pupils knew of any Greeks or other foreigners living in or around Springdale.'

'We can soon find out,' She rang the bell and asked the secretary to take a message round the school. 'At break I want to see any child who knows of a foreign family living in the town or on one of the new estates.'

At break the queue outside her door numbered some forty children. They were marshalled by the secretary, who admitted them four at a time. Nothing which came out of the interviews was of any help at all to Mr Ronsonby.

'There's the MacKenzies down our road, miss. They talk kind of funny.'

'Thank you, Walter. The MacKenzies are Scots and Scottish people are not foreigners.'

'There's a couple of infants goes to St Martin's name of Llanwyn, miss.'

'Thank you, Maisie. The Llanwyns are Welsh. Queen Elizabeth the First was the granddaughter of a Welsh prince. The Welsh are not foreigners.'

'No, miss, but they jabber among theirselves in a foreign language.'

'*Themselves*, not *theirselves*. The Welsh language is an ancient Celtic tongue, as are Highland Gaelic and the Irish language in which, nowadays, all the street signs in the Republic of Ireland are posted up. Did your family not go to Eire last summer?'

'Yes, miss.'

'Well, then, you know all about the Irish language, don't you?'

So on and so forth, but nothing came up about Greeks or anything else which could lead Mr Ronsonby forward in his tracking down of Mr Pythias.

‘I’m afraid I’ve wasted an awful lot of your time,’ he said remorsefully.

‘Not at all. Now we’ll have a cup of coffee and a biscuit to restore our wasted tissues and at twelve you can treat me to lunch at the Majestic, where we shall see the chairman of the education committee entertaining his latest girlfriend. He and his wife are separated, so he always has some young thing in tow. I shall greet him effusively and make him squirm, because he knows I know that the floozie he will introduce to us as his niece is nothing of the sort.’

‘I’m afraid,’ said Mr Ronsonby, stirred to gallantry, ‘that you are a very naughty woman.’ He wagged a finger at her.

‘*Toujours l’audace*,’ said Miss Edmunds, ‘has been my motto since college days. I love prodding the mighty in their seats.’

Looking back at the immense building over which she reigned, Mr Ronsonby, as he left by way of the wide-open gates, after he had given her lunch, reflected that she had probably selected a wise motto for the furtherance of her career. She had certainly been audacious. He knew two of the men who had been shortlisted for the headship of this very desirable post and he had shared their surprise, although not their disappointment and discomfiture, when Miss Edmunds had received preferment. He was fully satisfied with his own job and, although all the additions which had been made to the original plans for the new Sir George Etherege school would still not make his buildings as large as hers, or his numbers as great, he had never wanted to be head of a mixed school, let alone to have a staff on which women figured as well as men. As for having a woman deputy head in place of the tried and trusted Mr Burke (and a woman deputy would almost certainly have had to be appointed if there were women and girls in the school)... Mr Ronsonby shook his head at the very thought of it.

‘Margaret,’ he said to the secretary when he got back that afternoon, ‘I don’t believe those Greeks who are supposed to have visited his digs to collect Pythias’s effects have any foundation in fact.’

‘My husband tells me the pro has a nice set of secondhand golf-clubs to dispose of, but I don’t suppose there’s any connection,’ said Mrs Wirrell. ‘I expect he often has second-hand clubs for sale.’

‘You had better tell the Detective-Inspector, all the same. I didn’t know you knew that Pythias’s golf-clubs and clothes had gone from his lodgings.’

‘Well, I do take all the incoming calls, don’t I? — and that includes the calls from the police. Right, I’ll ring them.’

Her telephone message sent Routh on another wild-goose chase. Reason told him that the person who had obtained possession of the bag of golf-clubs would

hardly have sold the contents to the professional of the local golf-course, who would probably recognise them and ask some awkward questions. It also seemed unlikely that Pythias himself would have sold the clubs locally if he were planning to leave the neighbourhood either with or without the money for the school journey.

Routh went along the next morning and found the pro in the little shop adjoining the club-house. He was cleaning a set of irons. He knew Routh as a club member, although as one who had little time to spare for the most fascinating and infuriating game in the world.

‘Well, well!’ said the pro. ‘There’s nobody here yet to give you a game, but I’ll play you nine holes if you like, Mr Routh.’

‘No, Joe, I haven’t come for a game. I’m here on duty.’

‘Nobody’s robbed my till and the secretary hasn’t complained of missing anything from the club-house, has he?’

‘Nothing like that. I hear you’ve got a second-hand set of clubs for sale.’

‘A very old-fashioned lot of junk they are, too! Wouldn’t suit a gentleman of your ability. Ought to be sold as museum pieces.’

‘They didn’t belong to Mr Pythias, then?’

‘Good Lord, no! Though, for the amount of golf he played, they might as well have done.’

‘Could I have a look at them?’

‘Why not?’ The pro put down the polishing rag he had been using and went to the back of the shop. ‘Here we are,’ he said, coming back with a tatty-looking golf-bag. ‘There’s nothing like a full set of clubs here and those there are must have come out of the ark, like I told you.’

‘What on earth possessed you to buy them?’

‘It wasn’t buy, it was barter. I gave half a dozen used golf balls for them. They’ll come in useful for Mr Turnbull. He collects antiques.’

‘And you’re sure they’ve never belonged to Mr Pythias?’

‘Quite sure. I sold him his set only a couple of years ago. I’d know them again anywhere.’

‘He seems to have been rather a quiet sort, so far as I know. Did he have any friends among the members here?’

‘News to me if he did. He seldom came here, and when he did come it was usually to have a round with me or go round on his own, unless one of a foursome hadn’t turned up and he was pressed to play. I don’t suppose I saw him here more than twice a month, if that. His set of clubs was almost as good as

new.'

'If it should ever come your way, will you let me know?'

'Sure.' The pro eyed Routh speculatively and added, 'What's the big mystery?'

'Well, he seems to have walked out of his digs and hasn't gone back to his job since Christmas. There's a rumour that he's ill, but we think he may also be short of money,' said Routh, juggling with what might be either fact or fiction.

'Woman trouble?'

'It usually is.' They laughed and parted.

'It wasn't worth following up,' said Routh, when he met Bennett again. 'I'm getting tired of shooting at dead ducks.'

'I've got that letter Pythias wrote to Mrs Buxton last summer, sir. She didn't want me to have it and said she wanted it back as soon as we'd done with it.' He handed over the letter and Routh took out an envelope and laid it and the letter side by side.

'Well, I'm no handwriting expert,' he said, 'but I can't imagine that the same person wrote the inscription on this envelope which contained those cheques and this letter from Pythias. What's your view?'

'That's a very pretty little drawing on the inside page of the letter, sir, isn't it?'

'Agreed. What about it?'

'I wonder whether a man who can sketch as well as that wouldn't be quite capable of disguising his handwriting, sir.'

'They say a real handwriting expert can't be fooled, even if the subject chooses to print his letters instead of using ordinary handwriting, or writes with the hand he doesn't ordinarily use. I'll get the Super to dig up some expert for us.'

When the envelope and the letter came back, the expert opinion was that they could not both have been scripted by the same hand.

'So it wasn't Pythias who sent the cheques to the bank,' said Detective-Sergeant Bennett.

'Unless he got somebody else to address the envelope,' said Routh. 'I think it's time we dropped this case. If Ronsonby won't charge Pythias with the theft of the money and then bunking off with it, there's really nothing we can do.'

7

A Question of Water-Lilies



Except for the continued absence of Mr Pythias, the Easter term settled into its usual routine. The junior geography master became the senior geography master and received the extra allowance attached to this improvement in his status and a 'supply' teacher was appointed to cover the vacant position.

The cheques had been paid into the school-journey fund and it was generally assumed that they had been sent to the bank by Mr Pythias and that somebody else had addressed the envelope for him. Mr Ronsonby, with his wife's grudging agreement, had subscribed the rest of the money and had told nobody else about this. He was convinced at last that all his confidence in Mr Pythias had been misplaced and he said as much to Mr Burke.

'Well, everybody here is of the same opinion,' said Burke. 'Is the school journey still on?'

'Yes, of course it is.'

'Ah!' said Mr Burke, guessing the truth but thinking it better not to say so, since he had no intention of offering to share in the payment to the travel agents. 'Oh, well, before anything else comes about, I suppose we have to plan the official opening.'

'Yes. I shall call a staff meeting on Friday and see what suggestions are put forward. Have you yourself anything in mind?'

'I suppose we shall include the things we show the parents on open days, but the governors will expect a little more than that. It's a nuisance it has to come in the summer term. I don't want the sixth too much involved. GCE begins immediately after Whitsun.'

'Yes. Still, they are our top boys and must make a showing. I shall persuade the governors to fix a date for the opening as early in next term as possible and then the GCE candidates will have to wire in and memorise and revise for all they're worth. The challenge may stimulate them.'

'One can only hope so,' said Mr Burke. 'I don't think we've ever had such a

weak set of candidates for years. And all this picking and choosing of subjects! Give me the old Matric in which you had to pass in five compulsory papers.'

'It was hard on those who had no aptitude for maths or science.'

'I believe in the good all-rounder. Balance is everything. What's the use of a good bowler if he's got butter-fingers in the field and gets out first ball when it's only a long hop or a full toss?'

'We could do with Pythias,' said the headmaster, whose summer game was tennis, not cricket. 'He used to get some very advanced work from his geography classes, something which made an excellent and most impressive display. The man was an artist, nothing less. Oh, well, he's far away by now and has probably changed his name.'

'Detective-Inspector Routh has just come in. Are you free?' asked Margaret Wirrell, coming in.

'I'll go,' said Burke.

'I was just saying to Burke that Pythias has probably taken another name,' said Mr Ronsonby when Routh was shown in.

'Another name, sir?'

'Oh,' said Mr Ronsonby, trying to speak airily, 'you know what a hot-bed his native part of the world has always been. Pythias was at college over here and, except for his name, nobody would know that he wasn't an Englishman, but who knows what affiliations he may have had with his own country? I have never thought Pythias was a likely surname, but he has never offered any other.'

'I think, sir, you had better forget those sort of doubts. A man is entitled to call himself what he likes so long as he has no criminal intentions in so doing. I agree that, if Mr Pythias has absconded with the money, he may well have changed his name, but I see no reason why we should assume his guilt until we get more evidence of it than we've got at present. I am afraid, sir, the chances are that Mr Pythias is dead.'

'I would sooner believe that Pythias is dead than that he has absconded with what, in these times, is a relatively small sum of money,' said Mr Ronsonby, 'but what else can I believe? If he is dead we should have heard by now, surely?'

'Well, I've done my best and so, by all accounts, have you, sir, to trace him to Springdale. We've both failed, but there might be some substance in your idea that, if he has absconded, he has also changed his name. It would also mean that, if he was staying with friends there, they also have English names, for I could find no Greek ones in Springdale. I suppose you don't feel able to lodge a formal complaint against him for absconding with the money? We can't go any further

unless you do, although I may tell you that the case interests me. My view is that sooner or later we're going to find ourselves with a murder enquiry.'

'Murder? Good gracious me, Inspector! Think what that would do to my school! You know, Inspector, further to what I could see you regarded as my wild and fanciful notion that Pythias may have mixed himself up in Greek politics, perhaps those of a subversive nature, I am wondering whether he could have been kidnapped when he left Mrs Buxton's house on that Friday night and spirited away. He could be in a Greek prison by now. Does Buxton travel with a mate? It would take two of them to kidnap a grown man.'

'Oh, yes, sir. It needs two of them to load up and unload the furniture van. I've seen the mate and he endorses everything Buxton says about the time they knocked off on that Friday. I don't think we shall get any further with the Buxtons.'

'Well,' said Mr Ronsonby, 'I'm beginning to feel sure in my own mind that Mr Pythias has been caught up in Greek politics. I did have my suspicions that he had met with foul play — been mugged on his way to the station or on the train — but, if that had been so, you would have turned up some evidence of it by now.'

'Well, sir, I shall keep an eye on things, although not, as I say, an official eye, but there's really nothing else I can do at present. I'm under orders, you see.'

'Oh, well, I must just soldier on, then, Inspector.'

There had been a good deal more discussion of Pythias's absence from the staffroom and endeavours had been made to 'sound' Margaret Wirrell to find out what she knew. All efforts to extract information failed and for good reason. Even if she had known anything, she would not have betrayed the headmaster's confidence, but, in any case, her unvarying and truthful reply to enquirers was, 'You know as much as I do.'

Time wore on through a rather dismal spring until half-term and after. There were the usual epidemics of measles and chicken-pox among the younger boys and of influenza among the masters. Because of fluctuations in the weather there were whole days when no outside work was done on the building, but three weeks before the Easter holiday the contractor's foreman was able to assure Mr Ronsonby that, given any luck with the weather, the work would be completed very soon after the beginning of the Easter holiday. He was drafting in extra men and allowing more overtime and now could see an end to the job.

So bright, in fact, were the prospects that Mr Ronsonby called Mr Burke into consultation and then arranged another staff meeting at which Margaret Wirrell

was to be present to take notes. The date of the official opening could not be decided by the staff and headmaster because the governors had not so far reached agreement on this point. Besides, the mayor's list of engagements had to be taken into account and was not, so far, finalised.

'But there is no reason,' said Mr Ronsonby, 'why we should not present the governing body with three or four suggestions as to a possible date, if only to jog their memories. Perhaps somebody would give us a lead. It can't be a Thursday because of council meetings; it can't be a Saturday ("thank God!" said a voice) because our chairman plays golf on Saturdays, and it can't be a Monday because of the Philanthropic.'

'Well, that leaves plenty of choice,' said Mr Burke. 'Why don't we offer the Tuesdays, Wednesdays or Fridays of the first two or three weeks of term?'

Other voices took up a refrain.

'Will the choir be needed and are the orchestra to take part?'

'Does the head boy make a speech?'

'There will have to be a bouquet for the mayoress and another for the wife of the chairman of governors, I suppose. A boy in my form has a father who is a florist.'

'What about catering?'

'The catering, yes,' said Mr Ronsonby, seizing upon the most important item of the programme. 'We shall have to send out invitations, of course, but we must assume, for practical purposes, that everybody will accept. All the council members will expect to come and so will the whole of the governing body. The secretary and treasurer of the parent-teacher association must be asked and so must the heads of all the neighbouring schools. Her Majesty's Inspectors must be invited, although they probably won't accept as that would establish a precedent, but our own education officer and a representative of the contractors will certainly turn up. Most of the men will be accompanied by wives and there are ourselves and our own wives. Perhaps, Margaret, you will do the necessary arithmetic later on and let me have an estimate of the probable numbers. I may have left out one or two people, but you will know and can fill them in.'

'I suppose we let Bussell's have the catering order,' said Mr Burke. 'They always cater for us at the swimming gala and on sports day.'

'Oh, yes, we must support the local tradesmen when we can. When we know the numbers, perhaps you would see them, Burke. Take Margaret with you. Catering orders need a woman's touch. I can give you *carte blanche*, more or less, as no doubt the parent-teacher association will fix up a whist drive or coffee

parties or a fair, so there should be plenty of money for food and so on. After all, a school is only formally opened once in its lifetime, so we ought to make the occasion one which our guests will remember.'

'What about the choir and the orchestra, Headmaster?' persisted the teacher responsible for these amenities. 'The songs will have to be chosen and rehearsed, and —'

'Make out a list, Phillips, and bring it along to me. One thing, we have time in hand. The same goes for the orchestra. A list of possible works and, if a soloist can be found, all the better. The audience always likes to have a solo performance thrown in, whether instrumental or vocal.'

'There is Fallon on the trumpet, Headmaster, and —'

'Excellent. See to it and let me have the details. Now we come to another point, gentlemen. The governors want to make us a present to mark the official opening. They are prepared with some suggestions of their own if we have no special request, but would like to give us something we ourselves would prefer.'

Suggestions came readily and every suggestion had its detractors.

'A small cricket pavilion, perhaps.'

'Redundant. What's wrong with the gym changing room?'

'A piece of statuary.' (This came from the art master, Mr Pybus, who was hoping for a commission.)

'Some oaf would contrive to put graffiti on it,' said a dissenting voice.

'A memorial window.'

'Too churchy. Besides, it would get broken.'

'Heraldic lions on the front gates.'

'They would be an Aunt Sally for the local toughs.'

'To hark back a little,' said the art master, 'is the affair to be run on the lines of an open day? I mean, if so, there must be exhibitions of work. I have some very promising boys taking GCE in art, and —'

The headmaster sat back and let the tide of suggestions and argument surge round him. It ceased after a bit and then the deputy head, who had not joined in any arguments, said, 'To get back to the point, I thought we were discussing the gift the governors have decided to donate to the school, were we not? I was wondering about a water-lily pond for the quad.'

'The groundsman won't grass-seed the quad until the autumn and then the grass has got to grow. We wouldn't have the pond for goodness knows how long,' said the master who ran the gardening club. 'Otherwise I like that suggestion, but I'm sure the governors will want their present to be on view on

opening day.'

'And so it can be,' said Mr Burke. 'I suggest that we get the quad completely levelled and the pond sunk, before anything is done about grassing the rest of the area. There would be no point in digging up a lot of new turf to sink the pond. There is going to be a plinth of double paving-stones all round the quad and with that and a nice level surface and the pond there won't be any eyesore and all the grassing can come later. We are making the quad strictly out of bounds to the boys, of course.'

'If you have water-lilies you need goldfish,' said young Mr Scaife.

'If you have goldfish, a heron will get them,' said Mr Phillips.

'A heron won't come down to a space which is entirely enclosed by high buildings,' argued Scaife.

'Why don't we ask the boys for suggestions? Make a good subject for an essay,' said the junior English master. 'After all, the school is as much theirs as ours.'

'Well, gentlemen,' said Mr Ronsonby, 'I don't think this is a matter which can be settled out of hand. Perhaps you would all go away and give it your earnest consideration. I shall call another staff meeting at the end of next week and, if necessary, take a vote.' He motioned Burke to stay behind as the others filed out. 'I like the idea of that water-lily pond,' he said.

'Well, I can be sure of three votes in favour of it, my own, and those of Filkins and I think Scaife. Filkins can see his gardening club as honorary custodians of the pond. They'll revel in doing the planting and he'll see that they make a success of it. He's got a very tidy little pool in his own back garden, so there's nothing he doesn't know about fish and water plants.'

The English master set his essay subject to the second, third and fourth years, as anybody higher up the school was not likely to stay long enough to receive much benefit from any amenity which the governors provided. This was pointed out by the senior English master, who added that, in any case, the fifth and sixth were far too busy with preparing for public examinations to be pestered with an essay which had nothing to do with their work.

The bulk of the middle school, it seemed, favoured a trampoline for the gymnasium or a school swimming-bath, or (a project which the music master had been fighting for years) the formation of a school pop group with instruments and a microphone, all to be provided by the governors.

The staff, meeting with Mr Ronsonby again on Friday afternoon, settled almost unanimously for the lily pond, and Margaret Wirrell was instructed to get

leaflets from leading firms (not necessarily local ones this time) and submit them to Mr Filkins. When he had whittled the possible firms down to three or four, Mr Ronsonby promised to bring up the subject at the governors' meeting on the following Wednesday 'and see what they think,' he said. 'After that, if they agree to give us the pond, they may prefer to get estimates and tenders for themselves, so I shall make it clear that our list merely offers some suggestions. They will like to know that we have taken that amount of trouble over the matter, and that we are enthusiastically in favour of the pond.'

'I hope the official opening won't interfere with the school journey,' said young Scaife in an aside to his friend Marmont.

'There is no chance of that, Mr Scaife,' said Burke. 'The opening will be early enough in the term to avoid any clash. It is not ideal that the journey is to take place in school time, anyway.' (Mr Scaife and the other masters who were going to Greece thought that it was.) 'Unfortunately, to obtain the concession of cheap fares, Mr Pythias had to settle for June. Had it not been an outing of high educational value, Pythias would never have applied for school-time leave or had it granted.'

This brought back the missing Pythias to everybody's mind. His absence by this time had been taken as a matter of course by the rest of the staff, although they had not ceased to speculate about it, but now that his name had cropped up again in this public way, Scaife asked, 'I suppose there's no news of him, Headmaster?'

'If there were, Mr Scaife, the staff would be the first people to know.'

The masters dispersed to dismiss their classes. Mr Ronsonby never held staff meetings outside school hours. There were more reasons for this than mere consideration for the staff. The school was rich in out-of-school activities and the various clubs were held directly school was finished on a Friday afternoon. Friday was the day for the choir with or without the orchestra. The poultry club (with arrangements for weekend feeding) had chosen Friday and so had the chess club and other out-of-school societies. Mr Ronsonby was known to be greatly in favour of the clubs and to look very kindly upon those who gave up their time to run them. He knew, however, that to keep his staff after school hours merely to attend a staff meeting would not only breed resentment among the teachers, but would result in the winding-up of the clubs, for no boy, however keen, would be willing to hang about for half an hour or more, even if the staff themselves would be prepared to carry on the clubs so much later than usual.

‘I shall need to give up my Monday evenings as well,’ said Mr Phillips, attempting a martyred air as he left with Mr Filkins. ‘If choir *and* orchestra are to be involved, they will need rehearsing more than once a week. When it gets nearer the date of the opening, I may need to ask for some school time as well.’

‘You’ll be quite popular so long as you ask for last lesson on a Friday afternoon,’ said Mr Filkins. ‘Nobody does any work after break on a Friday. It’s simply a matter of keeping sufficient order to ensure that somebody doesn’t actually burn the school down. Jodley, in my form, is a member of your orchestra. You are welcome to him any time you like.’

‘He is our tympanist.’

‘I’ll bet he is. Has he busted a drum or the cymbals yet?’

‘You know,’ said the junior English master to his senior colleague, ‘when we have the next staff meeting I’d like to suggest to the Old Man that we include some verse speaking in the opening-day programme.’

‘Such as what?’

‘Well, the school is named after Sir George Etherege. Wouldn’t it be a thought if we had some of Sir George’s verses spoken?’

‘Such as what?’

‘Well, I thought of getting the verse-speaking choir to make a rather theatrical bow to the mayoress and the wife of the chairman of the governors — they are bound to be sitting together — and give them the first stanza of “Ladies, though to — ”’

‘Though to what?’ asked his senior sardonically. ‘A poem written by a man who was alive throughout the reign of Charles Two is hardly — never mind. Spit it out. I’ve forgotten it.’

‘Ladies, though to your conquering eyes
Love owes his chiefest victories,
And borrows those bright arms from you
With which he does the world subdue,
Yet you yourselves are not above
The empire nor the griefs of love.’

‘Have you forgotten, or didn’t you know, that the town clerk’s wife is staying with friends because the chairman of the governors —’

‘Oh, Lord! I’d forgotten that!’

‘Forget the verse speaking, too.’

‘I don’t see why the choir and the orchestra should have it all their own way. Then there’s Pybus. He will make the art room a showplace not only with the

boys' work, but with his own.'

'Pybus can't draw, paint or sculpt.'

'The boys turn out some good stuff.'

'Oh, yes, he's a good teacher, but he can't produce the goods himself. I'll tell you who ought to have gone in for art in a big way and that's Pythias. Did he ever show you any of his work?'

'No, not that I remember. I wonder where he's got to?'

'Don't we all. Anyway, if you'd seen what Pythias can do, you'd remember all right. He showed some of us one or two pictures, but Pybus wouldn't have been over-enthusiastic about them, I daresay. There's a lot in that gag — Shaw's, was it? — he who can, does; he who cannot, teaches.'

'Aimed at the literary critics, I suppose, but unfair, if so. Many of them are very good writers themselves. But this showmanship business. Filkins wants to stage an exhibition of cut flowers and garden produce. There might be promotion for anybody whose work catches the governors' eyes. I don't want to be left out of the running.'

'Filkins has his uses. At least he got his boys to clear up that mess in the quad.'

'He says he didn't. Carpenter wants to fix up a cricket match on opening day — fathers and older brothers against the school. It looks as though everybody is aiming at a place in the sun except you and me.'

'Not to worry, my poor ambitious lad. I certainly don't.'

'It will be a damn good thing when the whole business is over. Failing anything by Sir George Etherege — God! How we could have spread ourselves if only we'd been named after Tennyson or Matthew Arnold! Oh, what do you think about Kipling's *If*? Always goes down well with the older generation.'

'Yes, but most of them have given up the struggle to live by its precepts.'

'If they ever tried them out! Then, of course, there's *Rabbi ben Ezra*. Strange to say, most boys like that rather sickening piece.'

'If you're going all out for the tried and trite, what's the matter with *Gunga Din*? I'd abandon the whole verse speaking idea, if I were you,' said Burke, when, unable to obtain consolation from his senior colleague, the young man canvassed his views.

'English is a major school subject, far more important than music and art and cricket matches and flowers and mixed veg.'

'So is maths, but it's not a show-off subject.'

'I happen to know that Gibbs is going to exhibit a working model of

Stephenson's Rocket that his lower-fifth history class have made. A perishing waste of time I call it. *That's* not history teaching,' said the junior English master, who was still racking his brains to think of something to put on show, to young Mr Scaife, the next confidant.

'It keeps his lads happy. They're all on the fidget just waiting to leave. I call them the factory-hands-and-union-block-vote brigade,' said Scaife.

'Well,' said Mr Burke, who overheard all this, 'anything is preferable to school, I expect, for some of them. The growing boy can't wait to burst the bonds of the prison house. Has it ever struck you that school is purgatory to a dull boy?'

'Well, he retaliates by making it purgatory for the likes of us,' said the senior English master. 'Anyway, when I think of myself I think of the Apocrypha: "And some there be that have no memorial", so cheer up, laddie. Those words will apply to most of us, no doubt, in time.'

'Then I propose,' said Mr Scaife, 'that we have the names of the staff inscribed with a sculptor's chisel on the surround of the governors' lily pond.'

8

Digging Up the Past



Margaret Wirrell, who had gone out with the others from another staff meeting, followed the headmaster to his room.

‘I’ve looked up those garden-pond people,’ she said, ‘but don’t you think it might seem a bit like forcing the governors’ hands if we give them a list of possible firms who would do the job?’

‘Yes, I think it might. I do not intend to confront them with a list, but only to hold it in reserve in case they ask me whether I have any ideas. I do hope they will agree to the pond. I like the thought of it very much. It will be ornamental and also out of reach of the boys. I imagine, too, that these pools come within a fairly wide price range, always an advantage when you have no idea of how much the donor is prepared to spend.’

‘Maybe I’ll persuade my husband to let us have one for our own garden. I know just where I’d like it and we’ve got plenty of room.’

‘I’m sure about the pond and the fish, but I’m not too sure about the water-lilies,’ said Mr Ronsonby. ‘Don’t they need a lot of sunshine? With tall buildings all around, they may find themselves in the shade most of the time. On the other hand, the quad is a good size, so there may not be any problems. Oh, well, Filkins will know.’

Mr Ronsonby had had to inform the education committee of Pythias’s disappearance, and from them it had percolated to the governors. The first question the head-master was asked at the governors’ meeting was, ‘No news of Pythias, I suppose?’

‘I’m afraid not, Sir Wilfred.’

‘I never liked the idea of appointing a foreigner,’ said another governor.

‘Nonsense, Manning,’ said the chairman. ‘The man was well qualified and spoke perfect English. Educated over here, as a matter of fact, wasn’t he, Ronsonby?’

‘Yes, Sir Wilfred, so far as his university training was concerned. He took a

good degree in geology and metallurgy.'

'Off on a toot looking for oil, and in *our* country, too, I'll be bound,' said Manning. 'Anyway, let's get down to business.'

Mr Ronsonby's suggestion that, if the governors were kind enough to make the school an opening-day present, a lily-pond would be most welcome was received with approval, especially by Mr Manning, whose brother-in-law was in landscape gardening with special interest in shrubs, greenhouses, garden chalets, paving slabs and garden pools.

Manning was not the most popular member of the governing body, for he seemed to regard himself in duty bound to carp and cavil at every suggestion put forward by his fellow-members, but on this occasion the governors realised that, so long as his brother-in-law was commissioned to supply and sink the pond and to establish the plinth of stone around the quad (this was not in the builder's contract) they could count on some reduction in the price of their gift. As they themselves had no central fund on which to draw, the money for the pool and payment for the work involved would come out of individual pockets, so any lessening of that particular load was extremely welcome.

A week before term ended, all the actual construction work on the school building was finished. The interior decorators were still busy, but hoped to be able to report that another few days would, in the words of the foreman, 'see us through', and the contractors had already sent down their experts to pass judgement on what had been a vast and important project. The first floor was not a replica of the ground floor which housed the big school hall, the entrance vestibule, the cloakrooms and the secretary's and the headmaster's offices, but it covered the same amount of space and included the handsome library.

The second floor was a good deal smaller. The music room and the art room were up there so that the sounds of singing, instrumental discords and, from the art room, the thumping of wet clay and the general mayhem without which, it seemed, no art class could express itself, should not impinge upon the quieter, if more boring activities which were being carried out in the rest of the school. (The woodwork centre, like the gym, was a separate building, reached by a covered way and adjacent to the gym changing rooms.)

As breaking-up day drew nearer, Ronsonby said to Margaret Wirrell that he hoped he was going to muster a full staff at the beginning of the summer term.

'Yes,' she said. 'We don't want anybody else falling off the back of a lorry.' Mr Ronsonby stared at her, but she merely picked up some lists he had given her to type out and went back to her own room.

On the following Tuesday, the caretaker brought the headmaster a report concerning two second-year boys named Travis and Maycock. The third year in any senior school is the acknowledged repository of nuisances, but the second years are still, so to speak, finding their feet, and these boys had been in no particular trouble before. Moreover, it transpired that they might be credited with praise rather than blame for their part in what had happened.

Assembly was over. Margaret Wirrell was in her office looking through the morning's correspondence and Mr Ronsonby was in conference with the music master to make a final selection of the songs and orchestral pieces to be rendered on opening day, when there came a tap at the headmaster's door.

'Just see who that is,' said the headmaster, 'and, if it's a boy, send him away.'

It was not a boy, but Sparshott. He closed the door behind him, advanced to the headmaster's desk and said he had come to report another break-in.

'Good gracious!' said Mr Ronsonby. 'Sorry, Phillips, but perhaps I had better look into this. Now that the buildings are finished we don't want any vandalism.' Mr Phillips removed himself and the headmaster turned to the caretaker. 'Was it a nuisance break-in or was there intent to create damage or to steal?' he asked.

'It's a kind of tricky story, Mr Ronsonby, sir, and I can't do nothing but relate to you my end of it. I was having a bit of an early supper round about eight o'clock last night before making my last rounds of the premises before an early retirement, me having had a bit of a chill on the innards over the weekend with subsequent inconvenience and weakness, when there comes a knock at the front door.

' "See who that is, Ron," I says to my boy, so he goes to the door and comes back to say as two boys named Travis and Maycock had come to report as somebody unauthorised was in the school. They reckoned they could hear him.

'Well, sir, of course I goes to the front door myself to see what it's all in aid of, but the two boys had scarpered. However, Ron had their names and said they was second years, but not knowed for any particular devilment and he reckoned they could be telling the truth, being as we had them other miscreants in the quad earlier on, so I takes him and the dog and we makes a recce and I opens up. Sure enough, there *was* somebody in the quad, or, rather, there was *two* somebodies, and it's my belief, sir, as they was the same two parties as the last time, only this time they hadn't risked the lights in the hall, but was working by the light of two hurricane lamps or something of that kind.

'Well, sir, we crope up on 'em, me and the dog, leaving Ron on the front steps, and I lets the dog loose. I reckon he got one of 'em by the trousers, but the

cloth tore and the two of 'em — the interlopers, I mean — made a dash for it out the door that leads into the vestibule corridor what I reckon they had left open in view of having to make a getaway. I noted as the swing doors into the hall and the crash-bar doors into the quad was open as the last time we had trespassers. I reckon the dog got a kick in the ribs from the second man, not the one whose trousers he tore, because I heard him, the dog, give a sort of yelp.'

'And you were on the spot as the result of a report from two boys, but what on earth were boys doing on the school premises at eight o'clock at night?'

'As they had scarpered by the time I got to my front door in the first place, sir, I could not say, but I have left a bit of evidence outside your room, sir, if you would wish to inspect it.' Without waiting for an answer, he went into the vestibule and returned with a storm lantern, explaining that he was sure there had been a second one, but that the trespassers must have carried it away with them.

'But what were they up to in the quad?' asked Mr Ronsonby.

'I investigated at first light this morning, sir, and I reckon they was only having a bit of a game roughing up the surface of the quad after Mr Filkins and his gardening club had got it all nice and smoothed over. If you ask me, sir, I reckon it's a couple of no-goods among the Old Boys what are jealous of the new building what they never had in their time, sir.'

'Extraordinary things people will do to make nuisances of themselves! I will get Mr Burke to check again that nothing has been stolen from the building itself and then I shall question the two boys.'

He interviewed Travis and Maycock in break, an unpopular practice with the boys, but which had the advantage, in his own view, of not interrupting lessons. Two young boys who had hastily combed their hair presented themselves at his door and were bidden to enter his sanctum.

'Well?' said Mr Ronsonby, who was a firm believer in putting the ball into an opponent's court. 'What have you to say for yourselves?'

Travis, eyeing the storm lantern which was on the headmaster's desk, said, 'Please, sir, it was my ballpoint, sir, rather a decent one, sir, I was given it for Christmas with my name on it and I didn't want to lose it, sir.'

'Well, go on. So far I remain in the dark.'

'Please, sir, it fell out of the library window on Monday afternoon, sir. It fell into the quad and I asked Mr Scaife if I could go and get it, but he said the quad was out of bounds and always would be, and whatever of mine was in the quad would have to stay there unless some authorised person found it and returned it to me.'

‘I do not understand, Travis, how your property came to fall out of the library window. Most of the windows remain closed at this time of year to conserve the central heating, do they not?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘So how did your writing implement get out of a closed window into the quad?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’ Mr Ronsonby did not know, either, but he could guess. He knew a great deal about boys and it seemed to him that the likeliest explanation was that some irresponsible and playful classmate had impounded the ballpoint and had taken advantage of the enormous possibilities of playing the fool in the library, partitioned off as it was into bays. This meant that most of the class was never in view of the teacher-in-charge at any one time, so that it was possible to sneak to a window, open it and throw something out.

‘So this precious object fell out of a closed window into the quad. How mysteriously these things happen, do they not?’ said Mr Ronsonby.

‘Yes, sir.’

Mr Ronsonby addressed himself to the party of the second part.

‘And what was *your* interest in all this, Maycock?’

‘We thought we would go and get the ballpoint, sir.’

‘Even though Mr Scaife had quite rightly vetoed such a course?’

‘We knew we couldn’t go and get it in school time, sir, but we thought after school would be all right.’

‘My sister saved up her pocket money, sir, to give it to me. You can get them at Baker’s, sir. They were special for Christmas. She would be rather cheesed off if I lost it, sir, so we thought it wouldn’t do any harm to go round and pick it up after school.’

‘I see. So you broke into enclosed premises at night —’

‘Please, sir, we only climbed over the fence into the field, sir. Lots of boys do it, sir, not our boys, but —’

‘But now that all the outer doors to the building are in place and, if I know Sparshott, securely locked each day when the cleaners have gone, how did you propose to get into school and into the quad?’

The boys looked down at the floor and were silent. Mr Ronsonby waited a full minute and then said that this was not the end of the matter, but that the bell had gone and they would be wanted in class. Then he sent a prefect to find the caretaker.

Appealed to to furnish a likely explanation, Sparshott said, ‘A long

acquaintance with the criminal classes when I was in the force, sir, has left me with the thought that they can be devious, sir, very, very devious, and boys, to my way of thinking, being born criminals at heart, sir, until they reaches man's estate, is the same and behaves according.'

'You have something there, Sparshott. So?'

'Well, sir, I been turning last night over in my mind, sir, and what I asks myself is why two boys what must of necessity be miscreants, sir, else they wouldn't have been of no disposition to invade the field and come knocking at my front door at eight o'clock at night, sir —'

The headmaster did not need to hear the rest of the explanation.

'Ah,' he said, 'these boys employed a Machiavellian ruse to lure you from your cottage on the plea that there was somebody in the school —'

'And got me to unlock the school, yes, sir, so's they could slip in behind me without my knowledge and consent, sir. That's about the size of it. They banked on me going the whole rounds of the school, I reckon, while they done whatever it was they come to do, havin' no knowledge as they had told the truth without knowing it, meanin' as there *was* intruders on the premises.

'I unlocked the front door to get in, because that isn't bolted now, whereas the back door and the door at the end of the washroom corridor was both bolted up by me when I makes my rounds after the cleaners have finished for the day, which is my routine, sir —'

'So you went up to the front door of the school, unlocked it—'

'And found as I had not been misinformed by them two boys, sir. There *was* men in the quad, not as I believe the boys knew that, as I say, when they come and knocked on my door. I reckon that was only a try-on to get me to open up the school.'

'So the boys slipped into the building behind you, but the intruders escaped, it seems.'

'They had both them doors on to the quad open, sir, likewise, as I reported to you, the door on to the vestibule corridor. One run one way and the other run another way, but I reckon they met up again in the vestibule. The front door was wide open because me and my lad come in that way. They pushed past Ron and that there hurricane lamp, sir, is the only evidence they was ever in the quad at all except for a bit of roughing-up as they give to the ground, sir, like as if they was going to dig it up.'

'I see. I wonder how they got into the quad?'

'I makes my inspection this morning, sir, before school goes in, and there's a

broken window in the boys' washroom, sir.'

'Couldn't that have been done by Travis and Maycock?'

'I don't reckon they done it, not for a minute, sir. It had been done with treacle and brown paper, sir, which is why I never heard the sound of breaking glass. It's an old burglar's trick, sir. If them two boys had done it there would have been no need for them to come to my cottage, sir, and inveigle me into opening up the front door of the school.'

'I wish, Sparshott, that you would go out into the quad again and look for a ballpoint pen with Travis's name on it.'

'Which is the object as I was just a-going to present to your notice, sir. It had fell just under the library windows and I reckon as there was some larking about and somebody throwed it out. It wasn't nowhere near where them trespassers had roughed up the ground, sir. I never noticed as the biro had a name on it, but that accounts for the two boys, sir, I reckon, although, not noticing the name, I never connected it with young Travis. I seen it laying there and I picked it up and put it in me pocket and forgot all about it till you mentioned it just now.'

'You had better see at once about getting that washroom window mended.'

'Which I have already put it in hand, sir, knowing the necessity, sir.'

Travis got his Christmas present back coupled with dire warnings to both boys of what would happen if they stepped out of line again, but Mr Ronsonby was puzzled. He called Mr Burke into consultation after he had asked him to check on all stock which might attract a thief.

'It's been the quad both times,' he said. 'What on earth can these intruders be after?'

'I can't imagine,' said Mr Burke. 'I've checked, and again there is nothing missing or damaged. If they really wanted to play merry-come-up, they would have smashed the pictures in the hall or broken into the canteen or thrown paint all over the place. Merely to scuff up the middle of the quad doesn't make sense. Of course, they did break a window to get in.'

'I have a deep distrust of things which don't make sense,' said Mr Ronsonby. At school dinner, where he presided over the staff table, he mentioned the matter.

One of the men said, 'Morbidity curiosity, Headmaster. All sorts of rumours have been going round the school.'

'Rumours, Carter? What rumours?'

'A boy in my form named Fanshawe is the son of a close friend of one of the governors and has got hold of the story that the governors are to give the school a present for opening day. It seems reasonable to suppose that, if speculation as

to the nature of the governors' present is going round the school, it is going round outside in the town, and that may have attracted the attention of vandals.'

'I still don't see why that should inspire anybody to attempt to dig up the quad.'

'Perhaps, Headmaster,' said Filkins, always anxious to bring the gardening club into the limelight, 'my squad could investigate.'

'I think not, thank you, Filkins. Any day now I expect notification from the contractors that they are ready to make the excavation for the pond. They will carry out any necessary investigation, I'm sure. They propose to get the foundations of the pond dug and made secure during the holiday and then you and your boys can amuse yourselves — under expert guidance, of course — in working out a list of suitable water plants and in planning where they are to be planted when the pond is completed.'

Breaking-up day came at last. The parting hymn, 'Lord, dismiss us with Thy blessing', sung at afternoon instead of morning assembly — a hymn which is rendered in every school at the end of every term, but the words of which, except for the opening line, have never been memorised by any generation of schoolchildren yet — pursued its mumbled course because all the hymnbooks had been collected, counted and locked away. Then the school streamed joyously out to enjoy nearly three weeks of freedom.

It was the Friday before Good Friday, so the landscape-gardening experts moved in on the following Monday and spent the rest of the week, up to the Thursday afternoon, measuring and levelling the quad, working out exactly where the pond itself was to be sunk and in doing the preliminary excavating. The governors had decided to do the school proud. The pond was not to be prefabricated, but constructed on the site and was to measure four metres by three, roughly thirteen feet by ten.

Over the Easter weekend there was another unsightly heap of soil and gravel in the middle of the quad, and at the instigation of Sir Wilfred, who was not only the chairman of governors but a personal friend of the Chief Constable, a policeman had been detailed to patrol the alley which ran along the end of the back gardens of those houses which bordered two sides of the school field. This patrolling, paid for by the governors, was to continue until the pond was completed, although what precautions were to be taken to guard it after that, nobody knew.

Guided by hindsight, Mr Ronsonby felt that he had guessed all along what would happen when the excavations began, but at the time he was as surprised,

horrified and incredulous as everybody else. The first notification he received of the terrible news came in the form of a telegram from Mr Burke, sent to his holiday hotel in Cornwall.

Remembering that precious time had gone by during the Christmas holidays before it was realised that Pythias was missing, Mr Ronsonby had left his holiday address with Mr Burke, and Mr Burke, since he was not going away for Easter, had checked, as usual, that Sparshott had his telephone number in case of any emergency which affected the school.

The news, therefore, had to go from the contractors to Sparshott and from him by telephone to Mr Burke before it reached Mr Ronsonby by telegram. The men digging out the foundations for the pond had called at the caretaker's cottage on the Tuesday after Easter Monday and had brought him the news.

‘Something nasty turned up, mate. Better come and have a dekko for yourself. It's a police matter, us reckons.’

Like Mr Ronsonby, Sparshott felt that he also had always known what was to be brought to light. He walked across to school with the man who had brought the message and they went into the quad. Here a little gang of workmen were standing round the hole they had dug. They were leaning on picks and shovels, but otherwise they might have passed for a group of mourners standing around an open grave. The comparison with an open grave was fair enough. At one end of the hole and on top of the rubbish which, mistakenly, it had been taken for granted that Mr Filkins's gardening club had tidied away, was a very dead man.

During his time in the police force Sparshott had seen a number of dead bodies. Only one of them had been caused neither by accident nor suicide. It was that of a woman who had been struck down by a drunken husband and had caught her head on the angle of the stone surround of a fireplace. She was battered but recognisable enough, and the hysterical husband had gone straight to the police station to report what had happened.

Sparshott had also seen the bodies of suicides, one of whom had taken an overdose, another who had thrown herself into the little local river, and there had been a man who, with no consideration whatever for the squeamish person who had found his body, had decided to cut his own throat — but, again, each corpse was recognisable. The body in the quad was not recognisable. It had been in the ground too long. Sparshott turned away and said, as unemotionally as he could, ‘I reckon that must be poor Mr Pythias.’

‘You'll need the police,’ reiterated the workman who had called at the cottage to give him the news.

‘I’m going to ring ’em straight away. You don’t need to advise me. I’m ex-police myself,’ said Sparshott.

‘We’re knocking off for today. Can’t go on while *that’s* there,’ said the foreman.

‘I reckon we’ll be knocking off for a good long time to come,’ said another of the men. ‘Once the police gets on to this, no knowing when they’ll let us come back. Want us to shovel some earth back on to the poor bugger, mate, just to show a bit of respect, like?’

‘No, certainly not. I been a copper, I tell you, so I knows the ropes. They’ll want to see things exactly as they are,’ replied Sparshott firmly.

The men collected their jackets and put them on. They loaded their implements and themselves into the truck which had brought them to the school and drove away through the front gates which Sparshott had opened for the truck when it arrived. No farewells were said. The truck could have been a funeral car. Sparshott unlocked Margaret Wirrell’s office and went to the telephone. ‘We reckon we’ve found poor Mr Pythias, sir,’ he said. ‘Could you make it convenient to come along, seeing as Mr Ronsonby ain’t available?’

9

Self-Appointed Sleuth



A part from the medical and pathological evidence which came out at the inquest, there was plenty to confirm that the body was indeed that of Mr Pythias. For one thing, his empty briefcase, found beside the body, was identified by three members of the staff separately and there was enough unrotted material which was clothing the corpse for it to be recognised as part of the suit which Pythias had been wearing on what had proved to be his last day as a schoolmaster.

The Chief Constable and the Detective-Superintendent now superseded Routh in the enquiry, and the Detective-Inspector was obliged to place himself under their orders. As he had some knowledge of her household, his first assignment was to question Mrs Buxton and take her yet again through her story, including her description of the two visitors who had collected Pythias's property.

'Look, do you want me to have a breakdown?' she demanded tearfully. 'How can I help what wicked men do?'

'You can't, but you can help *us* and you must,' said Routh, not unsympathetically. 'Tell me once more about these astrakhan and musquash-coat people who called here for Mr Pythias's things. They may be his murderers, you know. On the face of it, we think they were.'

At this she rallied, sniffed, dried her tears and said, 'I've told you all about 'em I can, haven't I? Come to think of it, though, my nevvie, him on the top floor, he see 'em, too, and, being an artist and them being togged up like they were, he made a sketch of 'em and give it to me. I can show it you if you like.'

'I don't know why you haven't shown it to me before,' said Routh. 'It could be valuable corroborative evidence.'

'What of?'

'That these people really did call here, of course.'

'Did you doubt my word on it, then? Oh, well, who supposes the police to be

gentlemen?’

‘We can’t afford to be, love. Show me this picture of yours.’

The two of them were in her ground-floor room, the room next to that which had been rented by Pythias. She went to a table drawer and took out a rolled-up sheet of cartridge paper. The sketch was crude and looked as though it had been done hastily, but it certainly bore out Mrs Buxton’s description of the two strangers.

‘I’d like to hang on to this for a bit,’ said Routh. ‘It may help us. Identification, you know.’

‘You’re welcome,’ she said, ‘and to the letter poor Mr Pythias writ me. I don’t want them sort of unhappy memories of him now.’

Routh’s next assignment — and he was not altogether sorry to have his work laid out for him instead of having to chart a course for himself — was to trace, if he could, the clothes and golf-clubs which Mrs Buxton’s visitors had collected from the lodgings. The inference was that they must have been very quick to get rid of the things before the news broke that the body had been discovered. If he could find out who had bought them, he stood a good chance of getting a description of the vendors.

‘The chances are, though,’ said the Detective-Superintendent, ‘that the things are weighted down and are in the deepest part of the river by now. On the other hand, these people may have sold them to an old-clothes dealer almost as soon as they had collected them from the house. Pythias was a dressy man. That suit which was on the body had been made of good material, so his other clothes may well have been worth a bob or two.’

‘No hat or overcoat was found with the body, was it?’ asked Routh.

‘No. Why?’

‘Wouldn’t he have been wearing both to go out on a chilly winter evening, especially if he was going on holiday?’

‘Yes, I suppose he would.’

‘And what about a suitcase?’

‘Probably stuffed his pyjamas and a toothbrush into his briefcase with the money, if he only intended to stay away a day or two.’

‘We have only Mrs Buxton’s word that he intended to stay away at all,’ said Routh, ‘now that I come to think of it.’

‘Good Lord, you don’t think that old party murdered the man and buried him, do you?’

‘No, but she’s got a husband and a nephew who could have done both.’

‘Forget it and chase up these obvious suspects who walked off with Pythias’s clothes and golfing bag.’

In accordance with this instruction, Routh, taking the sketch of the foreigners with him, went to the only old-clothes dealer in the town.

‘Ever bought anything off this couple or one of them?’ he asked, displaying the crude picture.

‘Not me. When?’

‘Very recently, I think, but it could have been just before or soon after Christmas.’

The dealer in cast-off clothing shook his head.

‘I’d have remembered that tit-fer,’ he said, pointing to the Russian-style cap. Routh thanked him and was not at all surprised by the answer. He had never supposed that, if Pythias’s effects had been sold, the sale would have taken place so near home. His mind was still running on the town of Springdale and it was there that he received positive news that somebody had sold Pythias’s possessions.

He applied first to a dealer in second-hand clothes, watches and bric-a-brac, but all he obtained there was a piece of advice.

‘I reckon you’re trailing stolen property,’ said the dealer. ‘If you wasn’t, it wouldn’t be a police job, would it?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine.’

‘Fair enough. Well, look, anything hot — or even a bit warm, come to that — wouldn’t be offered to a business like mine. I couldn’t afford to touch it, see? It isn’t on the list of stolen property. That don’t bother with old clothes, so what you want, mate, is the stalls in the Toosday market. Here today and gone tomorrow, as you might say. What’s the fancy name for stall-keepers?’

‘Itinerant vendors.’

‘Got it in one! You try of a Toosday in Broad Street. Always been a Toosday market there as long as anybody can remember. Of course it ain’t Petticoat Lane, but some surprisin’ stuff do turn up there from time to time.’

So on Tuesday Routh went again to Springdale to track down the Tuesday market. Here he had what he called will-o’-the-wisp luck. The very first stall-holder he approached did not recognise the picture of the man in the Russian cap and his woman companion, but confessed to having bought clothes, a pair of shoes, a clock, a wrist-watch, a tape-recorder and a suitcase ‘somewhen around last December’. This, thought Routh, sounded very promising, ‘Said he was a student and owed his landlady money,’ explained the stall-holder.

‘I wonder why he parted with the things? Why not have gone to a pawnbroker?’ asked Routh.

‘They’re rare birds these days. Bob may still be your uncle, in a manner of speaking, but the uncle of the old pop shop, well, he’s nearly what you might call an extinct species. Everybody’s on the never-never now, and you can’t pawn them sort of things.’

‘I suppose you haven’t still got any of the stuff I’m looking for?’

‘Gov’nor, with me it’s easy come and quick go. I ain’t got storage space, you see.’

‘None of it left?’

‘Not unless you count a folded-up docket of sorts as I found had slipped down a slit in the lining of his overcoat.’

‘Oh, an overcoat was part of the haul, was it?’

‘And a very tatty, poor-quality overcoat, too, squire, and not hardly worth what I gave him for it.’

This reply almost obliterated Routh’s hopes. He could not believe that a senior master on the top of the salary scale, with a special increment for being in charge of his special subject and with a junior master under him, would have owned a tatty, poor-quality overcoat hardly worth the money the stall-keeper had paid for it. There was also the description the vendor had given of himself as a student.

‘Can you remember exactly when you bought the things?’ asked Routh.

‘Ah, near enough. It would have been on the Tuesday before Christmas week.’

‘Not the Tuesday *in* Christmas week?’

‘No. I was down with flu then and never come to market at all. My old gal had to manage the stall and she had strict orders not to buy nothing from nobody without me being there.’

‘How old was the fellow who sold you the things?’

‘A matter of eighteen to twenty, a student, like I said.’

‘And you haven’t bought old clothes since then?’

‘Use your loaf, gov’nor! Course I have! Last Tuesday as ever was. But you spoke of round about Christmas time. Anyway, soon as they come in I flogged ’em. Good stuff they was and went like hot cakes.’

‘You wouldn’t know who bought them?’

‘There was three good suits and they went to three different customers. The good overcoat went to another and there was four pairs of good shoes not hardly

worn at all. They went to four other customers. Know the customers? Of course I don't. I ain't like a shopkeeper as is there all the week and has his regulars.'

'You mentioned a piece of paper you found in the lining of that tatty overcoat you got from the student. Can I see it?'

'You could if I'd got it on me, but I haven't. I can tell you what was on it, though.'

'You said I could see it if I wanted to.'

'Oh, so you can if you likes to go to my place and tell my old woman to take it from under the front leg of the table as it's propping up, but I don't reckon it would be hardly worth your while. It's a London theayter programme and there ain't nothing writ on it. If it hadn't been so thick and bulky I'd never have felt it in the lining, but just have got my old woman to cobble up the slit.'

'These things you bought recently, there wasn't a bag of golf-clubs included, I suppose?'

'Golf-clubs? No. Them as can afford to play golf wouldn't sell their stuff to the likes of me.'

At the Stone House, Wandles Parva, a village on the edge of the New Forest and not many miles from the makeshift grave in which the corpse of Mr Pythias had been discovered so accidentally, Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley and her secretary, Mrs Laura Gavin, were having an after-breakfast conversation.

'Well, the case has certain features of interest,' said Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley, 'but I cannot see any reason why I should involve myself with it, neither have I any excuse for doing so.'

'It's a muddle and you're good at sorting out muddles. It's practically in our neighbourhood, so you could operate from here. It concerns a school, with which, as a once-trained teacher, I feel myself involved. The dead man is a Greek, and foreigners, whether one likes them or not, are always romantic and interesting. There is speculation as to whether this man was merely set upon, robbed and murdered by muggers, or whether he was some sort of undercover agent working either for or against the Greek government, in which case his death may have been an assassination for political reasons. Shall I continue?'

'I feel you have covered the main points of interest. There is one other, however, which may be worthy of mention. The body, it seems, was buried in the school quadrangle.'

'Looks like local knowledge of some sort.'

'And very limited local knowledge. That is what adds to the interest. The murderer knew that the quadrangle was there and he knew that workmen had

dug a hole in which to bury their rubbish. He seems to have realised the possibilities of using their labour to save his own, but he does not appear to have known that a later excavation was to be made in order to sink a pond for goldfish and water-lilies.'

'Why don't you write to the local paper and point all that out?'

'You are the scribe in this establishment.'

'Well, if I wrote to the papers, the first point I would make is that Pythias, in spite of some of the rumours which seem to have been passed around, cannot possibly have been a subversive character at odds with the Greek government, or he would certainly not have been planning and organising this educational trip to Athens.'

'A valid argument — unless, of course, he was an undercover agent not *against* the Greek authorities, but *for* them. In such case, the holiday journey might have been seen as a means of getting him back to his own country without arousing suspicion.'

'Yes,' said Laura. 'Well, I don't think this cloak-and-dagger stuff is much in our line, do you?'

'Neither do I think it has any place in this particular case. I think the people where Mr Pythias lodged are far more likely to know why he was murdered. I feel sure that this was a simple matter of robbery, although possibly not by his landlady or her husband. There were others living in the house.'

'Would you remove my name from your visiting list if I got on to Gavin at the Yard and urged him to persuade the Bankshire police to co-opt you?'

'No. I have become addicted to your society.' Dame Beatrice looked at an unusually serious-faced Laura and added, 'I wish you would tell me why, apart from its connection with a school, this particular case fascinates you to such an extent that you want to drag your beloved and ever-busy husband into it.'

'To begin with, it's right up his street. He is, after all, Assistant Commissioner for Crime up at headquarters. To go on with, I'm intrigued by the murderer's choice of a burial ground. Surely there is plenty of wild countryside round about where a body could be buried secretly and never found? After all, until this particular body turned up — and that only for a reason which the murderer could not possibly have foreseen — it was taken for granted that the man had scarpered with the money.'

'I think that is too sweeping a statement. As I read the accounts given in the various newspapers, it seemed to me that the headmaster who had had Pythias on his staff at a previous school as well as at this one has been convinced

throughout that the man would never have made off with money which was not his own. That being so, the theory that Pythias had been murdered for the money was always a possibility and must have been in the headmaster's mind. I am sure the police suspected it, too, but, so far, have been unable to procure the evidence they need to charge one or more of this Mrs Buxton's lodgers.'

'Do you know what I'd really like to do? I'd like to take a room in that boarding-house and turn that rabble of men lodgers inside out. *One* of them must know something and I bet I could chisel it out of him. I wouldn't mind betting there's one of them who doesn't go out to work as a general rule. He's our man.'

Dame Beatrice looked at her secretary almost with superstition. She was accustomed to what Laura called 'hunches' and, although Laura had never very definitely claimed that she had the Gift, as second sight is tactfully and obscurely described by Highlanders, Dame Beatrice had often had reason to believe that Laura, without being able to explain why, had displayed a knack of hitting what appeared to be hidden nails on the head and forcing them to reveal lethal points protruding from the reverse side of some rough carpentry. She mentioned this in these same metaphorical terms and added, 'But on no account are you to take lodgings with Mrs Buxton. That must be agreed between us before you go.'

'Aha!' said Laura. 'Right! The villain of the piece has been singled out and will soon be named. I suppose Mrs Buxton is a sort of female Sweeney Todd, is she?'

'That will be for you to judge,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I doubt, though, whether she was responsible for disposing of the body.'

10

A Finger in the Pie



Are you one of those reporters?' demanded Mrs Buxton.
Laura briskly replied, 'Certainly not. I understand you have a room to let.'

'Oh, well, you must excuse me asking. I can't be too careful. You'd be surprised the trouble I've had since they found poor Mr Pythias. Gawpers and reporters and the police, there's been no end to it.'

'Who is Mr Pythias?'

'Was, you mean. Don't you read the papers?'

'I scan the front page of *The Times* occasionally.'

'You better come in. This is my sitting room. Next door is the room poor Mr Pythias had when he was among us. I haven't let it yet. It didn't seem decent, somehow, so soon afterwards and with the rest of the inquest still in the future. Well, it does seem strange you don't seem to have heard of our troubles; still, the room won't give you no bad dreams. Me and my husband and all my five gentlemen been so harried and worried and badgered by the police and the reporters as you'd never believe. There's never been anything like it. Ours is a quiet little town, as you must have noticed. Of course there's been a lot of strangers about while the school was being built, but they're all gone now. Nothing like strangers for bringing trouble, is there?'

'May I see the room? I haven't much time.'

'Next door to this, through the folding doors. Well, they used to be folding doors, but the tenants like their privacy, don't they? So I had them barred over as well as kept locked and you have to go out into the hall now to get in there.'

They went into the hall and Mrs Buxton produced a key. This, she explained, was a master key 'same as in hotels, because, of course, the girl and me, we have to get in while the tenants are out and clean up and make the beds. Well, this is the room. It looks over the garden, as you can see, and you got your own French doors on to the balcony and steps down to the lawn. It's the best room in the

house, barring my sitting room next door, but you need not worry about me disturbing you from there. Buxton and I only use it for Christmas and me for taking the tenants' rent once a week. Fridays is rent days, if that'll suit you, and seeing that yours *is* the best room in the house —'

Laura looked at it from the open doorway. It was a sizeable room with a high ceiling and, as the landlady had said, French windows. There was a three-foot single bed in one corner, a gas fire, a table, a writing desk with a swivel chair, an armchair and two bookcases. There was neither a radio nor a television set. The only other furniture was a wardrobe. Laura's attention was drawn to the painting on the wall.

'Do you tell me that all your tenants at present are men?' Laura enquired.

'Gentlemen,' Mrs Buxton said in a tone of correction. 'Yes, I don't, as a rule, take ladies, but I'm willing to make an exception in your case, you not being of the type to cause trouble, I'm sure. Single gentlemen — well, *unattached* single gentlemen, say — is what I look for mostly. When they form an attachment with a view to marriage, or whatever other ideas they may have, they have to go. Would you be a widow? I see you've got a ring.'

'I am not sure that I should like being the only female tenant and I think your gentlemen might resent my presence, too,' said Laura, without answering the question. 'Is there a communal spirit among them?'

'They all sit down to supper together four evenings a week. I don't cater for them Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays without I'm asked special and under no circumstances do they bring guests here. That's my strictest rule. If they want to be sociable, they have to go out and be it some place else.'

'Oh, dear! It sounds as though I should have a lonely life here. I have a large tribe of relatives and am accustomed to entertain them in my own house.'

'Sorry, but rules are rules and my rules have always kept me out of trouble.'

'Until now, it seems. You mentioned reporters and so forth.'

'Oh, you mean poor Mr Pythias. Well, I can tell you one thing: wherever he met his death, it was not in *this* house.'

'You refer to him as "poor Mr Pythias". What kind of death did he meet? Was it the result of a street accident?'

'I could say yes to that, but you'd soon find out the truth. Mr Pythias was set upon and robbed of a large sum of money he was carrying, and then brutally murdered, and whoever done it buried him somewhere in the grounds of the new Sir George Etherege school on the other side of the town.'

'Good gracious! What a terrible thing!'

‘Which is why I’ve got a room to let.’

‘I wonder whether I could meet your other tenants? One likes to know with whom one will be associating.’

‘Oh, they’re all out at work except my nephew. He’s the top-floor tenant. He’s an artist and likes the solitude up there. The others won’t be home much before six, I’m afraid, and then they’ll want their supper. We’ve had so many visitors of the wrong sort, you see, poking and prying and asking all sorts of questions.’

‘I thought you did not allow visitors?’

‘You can’t keep the police out.’

‘I suppose you yourself have friends in?’

‘That’s different, but it doesn’t happen often. I don’t even like my nephew having a friend in, but what can I do? He’s family, you see. By the way, I suppose you’d be willing to sign a lease for a three-year occupation?’

‘Three years? But your advertisement said the room would be let on a week-to-week basis.’

‘That was because I only expected gentlemen, not ladies, to apply. Their work might take them elsewhere at any time, you see.’

‘Wouldn’t that apply to women?’

‘Oh, I took you for a lady of independent means.’

‘I don’t know why. I work for my living like everybody else.’

‘I couldn’t consider anything but a three-year agreement.’

‘Then I’m afraid that settles it.’ Laura held out her left hand. ‘I might want to get married again, you see. Anyway, I couldn’t settle down happily in the room of a murdered man. I should always think it was haunted. I’m psychic, you see.’

‘Good gracious me! Poor Mr Pythias wasn’t murdered in here!’

Laura pointed to the luridly decorated wall.

‘No,’ she said. ‘If he had to live with *that*, I should think he committed suicide.’

Mrs Buxton admitted that she herself would not care to live with the painting, but added in defence of the decoration that it had been compared to the work of ‘somebody called Turner, whoever *he* was’.

‘The *Fighting Téméraire* painted while the artist was under the influence, then,’ said Laura. ‘I think you’ll have to wash that gory mess off the wall before you can let the room, you know. It’s a nightmare. Who painted it? Mr Pythias himself?’

‘Did you really call it a gory mess?’ asked Dame Beatrice, when Laura

reported her visit.

‘Well, it is just that. Anyway, I don’t think Mrs Buxton and I exactly hit it off and I didn’t meet her husband or any of the tenants, although I have an idea that the nephew was on the stairs and had a good look at me. It seems that he is a privileged person. He seems to be the only tenant who is allowed visitors. Tomorrow I’d like to go to the school and see what I can find out from that angle.

‘What excuse can you offer for troubling the headmaster?’

‘I shall present myself as the relative of a prospective pupil. I know all the ropes, so I shan’t trip up. A first-class character-actress was lost when I became first a teacher and then your secretary.’

‘I still cannot see why you find this case of particular interest,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘A man carrying a fairly large sum of money has been murdered. In spite of the present lack of evidence, the murderer is almost certainly somebody living in Mrs Buxton’s lodging-house. Sooner or later the police will find out which of the inmates it was. What possible interest is there in such a sordid little affair?’

‘The choice of a burial place, but I shall know more about that when I’ve visited the school. Having wormed my way in, I shall tear off the mask at what appears to be a suitable moment and invite the headmaster to come clean.’

Dame Beatrice cackled, but made no other comment upon this statement and, after breakfast, Laura drove from the Stone House to the town and, having enquired the way to it, she soon reached the school.

Two or three cars were already parked near the front door. She drew up beside them, mounted the steps and entered the vestibule. Margaret Wirrell’s *guichet* was open and Margaret said, ‘Good morning. Did you want somebody?’

‘I suppose I want to see the headmaster. I want to enter a boy for next term,’ said Laura.

‘Will you come in here, please.’ Laura entered the small office and was given a chair. ‘May I have your name and address?’

Laura gave both and Margaret wrote them down and then looked up at her. ‘Wandles Parva?’ she said. ‘But that isn’t in this county.’

‘Oh, the boy doesn’t live with me. I am not his mother. I am merely making enquiries. The address would be Padginton. That is not very far from here, is it?’

‘Padginton?’ said Margaret Wirrell. ‘Well, I know our catchment area has widened quite a bit now the new buildings are finished, but I think Padginton will still be outside our range. I’ll ask the headmaster whether he can see you.

Even if he can, you may have to wait for a bit. We've been kept very busy lately. I expect you've heard about it. I think the police are with him now.'

'Oh, yes, I read about it. It happened a long time ago, though, didn't it? I'm surprised the police haven't worked something out by now.'

'It's been some weeks, yes.' Margaret picked up the newly installed intercom. 'A Mrs Gavin is here, Mr Ronsonby. Is it any good asking her to wait?'

'What does she want?'

'To enter a boy from Padginton village.'

'We can't take him. Padginton is still out of our catchment area.'

'Even if she insists upon a single-sex school for the boy? That's still her right, isn't it? She seems a very nice type of woman.'

'All right. There won't be much chance that we can take the boy, but Routh is just going. The local police may be handing over to the Yard.'

Margaret turned to Laura. 'He'll see you in a minute,' she said, 'but I don't think you'll have much luck.'

'My husband is a policeman. He is at New Scotland Yard,' said Laura.

Margaret exclaimed, 'Not really? Is there any chance he would be sent down here?'

'I hardly think so.'

'I must tell Mr Ronsonby, all the same. He will be very interested, as it happens.'

Receiving the news, Ronsonby relayed it to Routh.

'This Mrs Gavin who wants to park a boy on me next term has a husband at New Scotland Yard. How's that for coincidence?'

'Gavin?' said Routh., 'I saw a Gavin and his missus once at a special police do. There's no coincidence about this, sir, if you ask me. He's the Assistant Commissioner for Crime and his good lady devils for Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley and Dame Beatrice is the psychiatric consultant to the Home Office.'

'Good gracious! We must be mixed up in something bigger than we know. I wonder whether the Greek embassy comes into it somewhere,' said Mr Ronsonby.

'Could well be, sir. I'll pass the time of day with the lady on my way out. Not that she'll remember me.'

'Ah,' said Margaret, as the headmaster's door opened, 'here comes the inspector. Mr Ronsonby will see you now, I expect.' But Routh, as he had indicated, did not take his departure from the school until he had looked in at the

secretary's little window which opened on to the vestibule. Margaret came to the opening. 'Is he ready to see Mrs Gavin?' she asked. Laura got up from the chair Margaret had given her and went to the secretary's door to meet Routh.

'Detective-Inspector Routh, ma'am,' said he.

'Just the man,' said Laura. They looked at one another. 'Haven't I seen you before?'

Routh recalled the occasion to her.

'It was one of those times, ma'am,' he said, 'when, as they say at the Olympic Games, the important thing is not to succeed, but to take part. I was in our section of the police choir. Unfortunately we didn't win.'

'As Robert Louis Stevenson said,' remarked Laura, 'to travel hopefully is better than to arrive.'

'I expect, all the same, ma'am, most people would prefer to arrive. I suppose you know the Yard will probably be called in on this case of ours?'

'I don't see why. It sounds to me a very local affair.'

'Political undercurrents, the Chief Constable thinks.'

'And what do the rest of you think?'

'Not ours to think, ma'am. As soon as a thing looks like being political, to some extent it's out of our hands.'

'But there's no real evidence that it *is* political, is there?'

'Pythias was a Greek, ma'am.'

'And was prepared to conduct a school party to Greece. He would hardly do that if he was in trouble with the Greek government. Come with me to the headmaster,' said Laura. 'I want to get all the low-down on this murder that I can. It doesn't sound like politics to me. I might tell you, as I shall now tell the headmaster, that this boy of mine from Padginton is a myth. It was an excuse to get into the school, but I never expected to have the luck to run into *you*, Inspector, in this helpful, informal kind of way. I'm trying to get Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley interested. If I do, you won't need anybody to come muscling in from London. It will remain your case, as it should.'

'I'm afraid that, so far as the Chief Constable and my Detective Chief Superintendent are concerned, Mrs Gavin, the die is cast. As soon as we were sure it was a case of murder, the Super and the Chief Constable took over. As it is, I'm only the dogsbody now.'

'That seems hard luck after all the work I'm sure you have put in,' said Laura sympathetically.

'Well, ma'am, if we'd known from the first that it was murder — although,

of course, we had our suspicions of that — the Detective-Superintendent would have taken over the case from the beginning, but we thought this man had simply absconded with the money, so I can't grumble. I've had quite an interesting time.'

'What happened at the inquest?'

'Just routine, ma'am, and an adjournment. The county pathologist couldn't find out exactly how the murder had been committed owing to the length of time the body had been underground. There were details of putrefaction, ravages by maggots and all the other nasty things which take away the dignity of death. What we do know is that there had been a knock on the head, but we don't know yet what the murder weapon was. There's only one thing I'm certain about in my own mind. Whether the Buxtons have any knowledge of it or not, Pythias was killed in their house. I'm as certain of that as I am of my own identity.'

'So when you mentioned a political murder, you did not really see it as that.'

'Certainly not at first. I reckoned it was a straightforward mugging until we found where the body was buried.'

'Mrs Buxton knew Mr Pythias had the journey money on him,' said Margaret Wirrell. 'She admitted as much to me when I went round there at the very beginning of this dreadful business before any idea of murder had entered anybody's mind.'

'Well, I had better not keep the headmaster waiting,' said Laura, as Mr Ronsonby came to the door and opened it. Routh, postponing his departure, allowed Laura and Margaret to precede him into the headmaster's sanctum and said, 'It seems we are entertaining angels unaware, sir. It turns out that Mrs Gavin is the wife of an Assistant Commissioner at New Scotland Yard.'

'Dear me! Then why does she wish to enrol a boy at my school? Is he to act as copper's nark?' asked Mr Ronsonby, smiling at Laura. 'I remember a most interesting detective story by Cyril Hare — Judge Gordon Clark, you know, Mrs Gavin — in which the vicar's wife insisted upon inserting herself into the police force in just that capacity.'

'I'm afraid,' said Laura, taking the armchair he offered her, 'there isn't any boy. I had to think up a plausible reason for getting into the school to see you, that's all. I certainly didn't expect to run into Mr Routh as well. That *is* a bit of luck.'

11

Concerning Chickens



So there we were,’ said Laura, on her return to the Stone House, ‘all cosy and relaxed in the headmaster’s den and, thanks to Detective-Inspector Routh, with me the belle of the ball. He was present at a police jamboree which Gavin and I attended some time back and he recognised me and sort of guaranteed my *bona fides* to Mr Ronsonby. I got all the gen they could give me about Mr Pythias and then the caretaker came in with a story about chickens.’

‘I have been thinking about your visit to Mrs Buxton. You said you did not get on with her very well,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘I didn’t. I checked her advertisement in the local paper — they had a copy in the reading room at the public library — and it stated plainly and clearly that the room the Buxtons had to spare would be let to a suitable tenant on a week-to-week basis, but, when I entered into negotiations with the woman, she wanted me to sign a three-year lease.’

‘Her tactful way of pointing out that she did not want you as a tenant?’

‘Obviously. For one thing, she prefers men lodgers. All the tenants are men. They are given their breakfasts, four cooked suppers a week at which everybody sits down, and individual high teas are provided on Fridays for anybody who says he will be in. No visitors are allowed, not even for a cup of tea. It all sounded very much regimented to me.’

‘Not for a household of men. The male sex goes out of the home for its pleasures, even if it is married. I do not suppose Mrs Buxton’s lodgers find her rules restricting. Was the house well kept?’

‘Oh, yes, it was neat, orderly and very clean.’

‘Were you shown Mr Pythias’s room?’

‘I was. It’s a good room on the ground floor, but it does have that awful great daub painted on one wall. I gained nothing from being shown it. The real fun was when I went round to the school.’

‘Ah, yes, the caretaker and the chickens, you said. Does he keep chickens?’

‘No. The boys do. The school, it appears, branches out in all directions when it comes to out-of-school activities, and the chickens are presided over by the younger boys. Well, the caretaker came to report that it was thought a fox had got one of the birds. The tally was minus one hen and there were feathers blowing about on the school field.’

‘Did the caretaker break into the headmaster’s conference merely to report on a missing hen?’

‘Yes, because it seems that he has a guilty conscience about *not* reporting another raid on the henhouse, which he now thinks may have something to do with the murder of Mr Pythias.’

‘You fascinate me. Proceed.’

‘Well, he came in, as I said, to report that one of the school chickens was missing and that there were feathers here and there about the school field. It appears that the chickens function in the corner of it furthest from the caretaker’s cottage, so that the cackling doesn’t disturb him, but if the boys who are on the rota for holiday feeding and egg collecting don’t turn up for any reason, the caretaker’s wife does the needful feeding and is rewarded by being allowed to keep the eggs. It is known that one of the back gardens of the houses which border the school field on two sides harbours a vixen and her cubs, and the caretaker came to report that he thought the missing hen was in her den.’

‘So what about the guilty conscience?’

‘The school secretary, Mrs Wirrell, dragged that into the light of day. She said, “Lucky not to have lost one or two chickens during the Christmas holidays.” Mr Ronsonby said, “How do you mean, Margaret?” At this the caretaker, looking a bit flustered, said that kids from the primary school had opened the henhouse at Christmas time and the fowls had scattered all over the place and had to be chased up and caught. The caretaker said he had not reported it, as the people who were staying in the cottage for Christmas had been able to round up the chickens and account for all of them, so no harm had been done and he had thought nothing of it until this fox and hen thing had brought it back to his mind. He said he realised he ought to have reported it, because obviously some unauthorised person or persons must have been on school premises. Mr Ronsonby agreed that he should have reported it. They have had two other break-ins, you see, and much more serious ones. Twice during last term a couple of people — men, not kids — managed to get inside the building itself and mess about in the school quad.’

‘Dear me,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘How did they manage that?’

‘The first time it was easy enough. While the builders were still at work there was no way of keeping people from entering the school from the rear. When the building was finished and the back of the premises made secure, the trespassers broke a window to get in. Again, they were two men.’

‘The same two men?’

‘The caretaker doesn’t know, but he supposes they must have been, as each time their objective seems to have been the quad, and that, of course, is where the body was found.’

‘I think I would like to have a word with that caretaker,’ said Dame Beatrice. ‘Will you take me along and introduce me to the headmaster?’

This proved to be unnecessary. Margaret Wirrell took Laura’s telephone call and asked her to hold on. When she returned, she reported that Mr Ronsonby would be delighted to see Dame Beatrice at any time which was convenient to her and a meeting was arranged at which Laura did not put in an appearance. Routh, however, was present. Apprised of the imminent visit, he made a particular request to be allowed to attend the conference.

‘If Dame Beatrice is interesting herself in the case, sir, there may be something in it for me.’

It was not long after the polite preliminaries had been gone through when Sparshott was summoned. The reason was so that he might render an account of his stewardship in front of the visitor. The matter of Sparshott’s Christmas leave and the broken window in the boys’ washroom came up again. Mr Ronsonby was a reasonable man and spoke of these things more in sorrow than in anger.

‘You know, Sparshott, you really should not have left the school unguarded,’ said Mr Ronsonby. ‘You had proof of how simple a matter it was for unauthorised persons to enter the premises while there were still no back doors to the building.’

‘But, sir,’ protested Sparshott, ‘like I told you before, the premises *wasn’t* left unguarded. Me and my wife and Ron went off to friends for Christmas Day and Boxing Day, that’s true enough, but my older son, Geoffrey — you’ll remember Geoffrey, Mr Ronsonby?’

‘Oh, yes, yes. A most sensible, reliable boy.’

‘There you are, then’ said Sparshott, giving Routh a triumphant glance. ‘Well, Geoffrey, not having nothing but a council flat for him and his wife, they was glad enough to take over the cottage for a day or two and I promised ’em they could stay for another couple of days after we got back, which is what they

done.’ He looked at the headmaster. ‘It’s not as though anybody at that time knew what terrible mischief there was afoot, sir.’

‘No, no, Sparshott. We quite appreciate that. Now then, Dame Beatrice has some questions to put to you.’

‘I know you wouldn’t try to victimise me, sir. You always been a fair-minded gentleman. I be ready to tell the lady anything as will help.’

‘Any objection to Mrs Wirrell taking down questions and answers and letting me have them?’ asked Routh. ‘If no objection, you’ll talk more free without me, I reckon, so I’ll take myself off.’

‘Everything will be unprejudiced,’ said Mr Ronsonby to Sparshott, ‘and we all want to know the truth about Mr Pythias, don’t we?’

Sparshott looked at the very old, very thin, yellow-skinned little woman opposite him. He averted his gaze. Her mirthless grin reminded him of a puff-adder he had seen at the London Zoo. Dame Beatrice saw a retired village policeman, honest, wary, probably rather stupid, but with a kind of bovine innocence about him. She began her questioning as soon as Routh had gone, and without preamble.

‘What did you think when you found two strangers on the premises on the evening when the school broke up for the Christmas holidays?’

‘Louts larking about. That’s all I thought they was. They scarpered quick enough when me and my dog come on the scene. I reckoned they was there for mischief, but I rumbled ’em too soon for them to do any damage. Of course I can guess now what they was up to. I reckon one or both of ’em had done for Mr Pythias on that breaking-up Friday and was looking to see whether that hole in the quad was a good place to bury the body. I don’t reckon they intended to bury it that night, though they might have had that idea. All the same, me being an ex-policeman and full of suspicious thoughts, as I reckon you have to be in the force, I got the idea, thinking things over, as Mr Pythias perhaps wasn’t dead when them chaps come to the quad, but they was planning the murder and was looking for a good place to put the body. I reckon the chickens give ’em a good way of distracting attention when they *did* bury it. There was always a bit of a mystery about who filled in that hole. It was thought Mr Filkins and his gardening club done it in the Christmas holidays, but Mr Filkins says they never.’

‘Mr Filkins would not have ordered his boys to do such a thing without my permission,’ said Mr Ronsonby mildly.

‘P’raps not, sir. Anyway, I reckon it was on the night of the chickens as his

killers buried Mr Pythias, sir, and, of course, we knows now as it must have been them that filled in the hole.'

'They seem to have run serious risk of discovery. I still wonder they took such chances. In any case, how would anybody outside the school know that such a convenient hole existed? The quad is not visible except from the interior of the building,' said Mr Ronsonby.

'Three hundred and fifty boys and more than a dozen masters knew of it, sir,' said Sparshott, 'and these things get passed around in idle chatter, don't 'em? Anyway, that's why they come the first time, I reckon. Like I said, sir, they come to spy out the lie of the land.'

'I wonder where they hid the body before they buried it in the hole?' said Mr Ronsonby. 'Those few days were the time of the greatest risk, one would think.'

'If they killed him at Mrs Buxton's, sir, I reckon that's where they left him till they could dispose of him. Them's basement houses. The back door leads to a passage which nobody would use except the Buxtons themselves.'

'If you are right,' said Dame Beatrice, 'then Mrs Buxton is implicated. Given the circumstances as we know them, I agree that it is most likely Mr Pythias was murdered in the house and that the story of his going to friends for Christmas was fiction. If that is so, I think it likely that he was killed either in his own room or in that of his murderer, and I have it from Mrs Gavin that there was little or no fraternising among the tenants, so that the body could have remained undetected in one of the rented rooms.'

'And there was Buxton's van to transport it to my quad when the time came,' said Mr Ronsonby. 'I see only one difficulty with regard to that. Once the building is empty, the gates are locked and no van could get into the school grounds.'

'It could get round to the road what border the school field, though, sir,' said Sparshott, 'All they'd have to do then would be to take the body round the alleyway and get it over the fence. Then they could have took it through the school from the back entrance where there wasn't no door and so through to the quad.'

'I see an objection to that theory,' said Dame Beatrice, 'You think that the interment was carried out when the hens were dispersed. Your relatives would have been out on the school field chasing them and must have been aware of any interlopers.'

'Not if them interlopers had already dumped the body in a classroom or somewhere afore they let the hens out, ma'am.'

‘Ah, that would explain matters. What were the exact circumstances under which your cottage was tenanted that night?’

‘Being as my wife and me and my son Ron was away for Christmas, my older son Geoffrey and his wife took over my cottage for a couple of days, and they brought a couple of friends with ’em. Me and my wife and Ron, we come home latish on Boxing Day after Geoffrey’s two friends had gorn and was told as some mischievious persons had let the hens out and what a job it had been a-chasing of all them chickens and getting ’em back inside. Geoffrey said he’d as soon try to round up a couple of dozen young pigs as them dratted, pestiferous fowls!’

‘How long did it take to catch them all?’

‘The others helped, but it took the best part of three hours, I reckon, because they had to keep going round to people’s front doors and asking if they could go into their back gardens. Geoffrey and Geoffrey’s wife and another chap done the chasing and an older lady stood by the henhouse to open the door for them to bung the chickens in and shut it up again. Lucky most of the hens was white Wyandottes, because it was dark time they finished and if they’d of been Buff Orpingtons they never would have caught ’em because they wouldn’t have been able to see ’em.’

‘While this safari was going on, would there have been any access to the school or its grounds other than by climbing the fence?’

Sparshott, who had appeared animated, so far as this was possible in so phlegmatic a man, shook his head, but not in negation of the suggestion.

‘As to that,’ he said, ‘well, Geoffrey soon realised as him and the other chap couldn’t keep climbing over the fence into the alleyway behind people’s back gardens. Him and the other chap might have managed it, but not Geoffrey’s wife, so he unlocks one of the side gates at the front of the school so as to get in and out. You will have noticed, ma’am, as there’s big double gates to admit cars and on either side of these there’s pedestrian gates leading on to paved footpaths to keep boys out of the way of staff cars coming in. Not as it do, but that’s another matter. Well, Geoffrey unlocks the left-hand one of these little gates with special instructions to the others to pull it to again when any of ’em went in or out. You could never have told from the street that it was unlocked, but, all the same, anybody could have used it to come in, if they’d knowed.’

‘Hindsight informs me,’ said Dame Beatrice, ‘that your older son’s movements had been carefully watched and monitored and the release of the chickens which so effectively engaged the attention of the whole household was

part of a carefully fabricated plan.'

'Please don't tell my missus that, ma'am. She'd never get another wink of sleep if she thought the cottage had been spied on by a murderer. Can't say I fancies the idea too much myself.'

'No, a disturbing thought. But tell us more. So Geoffrey, with the best of intentions, had unlocked the small side gate.'

'But he locked it up again when all the hens was accounted for.'

Dame Beatrice was sceptical about this, but she made no comment. She also wondered how the hen-chasers could be sure that all the birds had been accounted for. She said nothing of this either. She asked what had happened after Sparshott, his wife and his younger son had returned to their cottage.

Sparshott, it appeared, had made his late evening round as usual. He had gone in by the back way and crept cautiously around the ground floor of the building, but there had been no lights anywhere and no sounds of any intruders. He had been told about the chickens, but had been sure that releasing them had been the work of mischievous little boys.

'Did you go and inspect the quad?' Dame Beatrice enquired.

'I didn't see no need. There wasn't never no lights nor no voices nor nothing at all.'

'When did you go and look at the quad by daylight after the school Christmas holiday?'

'By daylight? Well, there wasn't no call for me to see it by daylight, ma'am. While school is on, the quad is no business of mine. I does a snoop round after school to make sure everybody is off the building before I locks up, but after that, unless any sort of alarm is give, I contents myself with pussyfooting round the building before I has my supper. Mondays is a kind of open evening, so I'm specially careful then, but there's evening classes Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, with school clubs mostly on Fridays. On Saturdays and Sundays I keeps my weather-eye lifting, same as on Mondays, but excepting for two boys who tried to have me on a piece of string because they'd dropped a biro in the quad there's been no more upsets of any kind. That matter was an upset, not on account of the boys, but because all the school outside-doors being on and fastened firm be that time, I found as two jokers had broke a winder in the boys' washplace and got into the quad; that winder was a pro job and not done by boys.'

'Did you actually find anyone in the quad when you investigated?'

'Not to say *find* them, ma'am. They done a bunk when they heard me and cut

a dash out the front door as I'd unlocked to let me and the dog in, and nearly knocked my boy clean down the front steps as he could easy have broke his neck.'

'When the workmen had finished, did you see them off the premises? — when they had really finished all they had to do, I mean.'

'No, ma'am. They went off as usual in their lorry and the foreman walked me and Mr Ronsonby and Mr Burke all round everywhere to ask us whether we was satisfied with the work.'

'We were glad to see them go,' said the headmaster, 'but I must say that they had left the place very tidy, very tidy indeed.'

'Yes,' agreed Sparshott. 'Even where them last two fellers what broke the washroom winder and then tried to scuff up the quad, even that was all smoothed over again. The foreman's lads done that. I reckon the scuffing-up was where them villains was beginning to dig up the body when they found out as a pond was going to be sunk there.'

'Well, thank you very much, Mr Sparshott,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I think you are right about the reason for the scuffing-up. You must have disturbed them before they got very far.'

'I would of reported them chickens earlier, sir,' said Sparshott to Mr Ronsonby, 'but seeing as no harm was done to the chickens and me thinking it was only dratted little junior-school boys —'

'Yes, yes, I quite understand, Sparshott.' The caretaker removed himself and Mr Ronsonby added, 'Sparshott is not a bright individual, but it seems that when the body was found he began to put two and two together. Routh must hear about the chickens. Margaret's notes should give him a vital clue as to when the body was buried.'

'But not when the murder itself took place,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I should also like a word with the builders' foreman.'

'I know where they're working,' said Margaret Wirrell. 'It's on that new estate on Carne Hill.'

'Excellent. Perhaps you could direct Dame Beatrice to it. Would you care to have Margaret go with you, Dame Beatrice? She has had dealings with the foreman while his men were working here, and could effect the necessary introductions.'

The foreman greeted Margaret as an old friend.

'Who'd have thought we'd get mixed up in a murder?' he said. 'Been in the Sunday papers and everything. Be something to talk about in the long winter

evenings when the telly goes on the blink, won't it?'

'Dame Beatrice is from the Home Office and would like a bit of help from you.'

'Welcome, I'm sure, though I don't know what I can tell her that I haven't already told the police.'

'There is just one thing,' said Dame Beatrice. 'I wonder whether you recollect having a hole dug in the school quadrangle so that your men could bury some rubbish there instead of carrying it right through the building and disposing of it outside?'

'That would have been before Christmas, as I recollect it, when they dug that hole in the quad.'

'Yes,' said Margaret, 'that's right. They dug the hole before breaking-up day and when I looked in on the Monday before Christmas Day it was still there and I said to one of your boys, "How long have we got to put up with that eyesore?" He said, "Sorry, miss" (well, that was a compliment to a woman who's been married for fifteen years) "well, sorry, miss, but there's no point in us filling it in until we've got the rest of the rubbish to put in it." Well, I get office holidays, not school holidays, so a couple of days after Christmas I popped into school again to see if there was any correspondence and to clear up one or two oddments and I just put my head inside the hall and that's when I saw out of the windows that the hole had been filled in, roughly, it's true, but filled in, all the same.'

'And the thing about *that* is,' said the foreman, 'as my lads never done it. We thought one of the masters had rounded up a squad of boys to do the job, as there had been complaints about the hole being an eyesore.'

12

Lost, Stolen or Strayed



The school reassembled after the Easter holiday to find that, by the end of the first week of term the timetable, in the expression of young Mr Scaife, had ‘gone very elastic’. He meant that boys were called out of class during the afternoon sessions (Mr Ronsonby refused to have the important morning lessons upset) for choral and orchestral rehearsals, verse-speaking practice (the junior English master had won the day and was now prepared to offer Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’ to the opening-day audience), extra coaching for the first eleven, practices in the school hall for the prize-giving ceremony which the governors, in spite of Mr Ronsonby’s disapproval, had insisted upon featuring in the programme, and extra sessions for the star woodwork pupils who were to stage an exhibition of children’s toy horses and go-carts.

Meanwhile, Mr Ronsonby and Mr Burke, with the calm and expert help of Margaret Wirrell, were compiling, altering and amending lists, lists and more lists of visitors, and in working out the seating accommodation and the food and drink for the notables.

The prize-giving to which the headmaster had agreed with so much reluctance was in lieu of the lily pond. Even the chairman of the governors felt that it would be inappropriate to disturb any further the last resting-place of Mr Pythias.

‘Later on, perhaps,’ he said regretfully. ‘Anyway, lots of prizes, Ronsonby, each book autographed by myself. The boys would like that, eh?’

‘It comes hard on the majority who will not win anything, Sir Wilfred. That is my objection to the awarding of prizes.’

‘Oh, nonsense! Battle of life, eh? Anyway, I rely on you to offer prizes for *everything*, not just for school-work. Never did any good at school myself and look at me now!’

Yes, thought Mr Ronsonby, and was reminded of a phrase he had read: Look

at you now, you super-fatted bore!

‘We could offer prizes for good attendance and punctuality,’ he said. ‘Those would include some of the less able boys perhaps, but it would be a return to the Victorian age, wouldn’t it?’

‘Victorian age, yes, and none the worse for that,’ said Sir Wilfred sturdily. ‘Anyway, lots of prizes, Ronsonby. We want the boys to remember the day.’

Mr Ronsonby thought that the day would best be remembered not by the boys but by himself and the staff, who would be bearing the burden and heat of it. He made a last suggestion that the governors might prefer to spend their money on sports equipment, but this was flatly turned down.

Meanwhile there were other problems. On the first day of term, a Monday, as it happened, young Mr Scaife called the names of his pupils as usual and then asked, ‘Anybody know anything about Travis and Maycock?’

‘They went camping, sir.’

‘I didn’t know they were Scouts.’

‘No, they went on their own, sir.’

‘I was about to add, Kemp, that how they spent the holiday is to me immaterial. My only concern is that this morning they ought to have shown up and they have not done so.’

‘No, sir, they couldn’t, sir. They’ve joined a union, sir.’ (This from the form’s ‘funny man’.)

Mr Scaife prided himself upon being a broadminded person and was sufficiently to the left in politics to be interested in this statement.

‘Oh, yes?’ he said. ‘What sort of a union?’

‘Travis said he didn’t see any point in coming back to school on a Monday, sir. He said that Monday morning was a dead loss anyway, so he and Maycock would be back on Tuesday, sir. That’s tomorrow.’

‘Well, it will be nice to see them and very nice for them to explain themselves to the headmaster.’

‘The difficulty there, sir, is that they may not turn up tomorrow, either. Their union may not allow them to work a broken week, sir.’

‘Take fifty lines for insolence!’ snapped Mr Scaife, coming to his senses. He inserted two black noughts in the register, closed it and mustered his class for assembly. However, his absentees did not show up on Tuesday, either, so again he had to mark them absent. As there was now only a fortnight to go before the great day, Mr Ronsonby, having conducted the assembly service on Tuesday morning, left the platform to Mr Burke, who surveyed and then addressed the

school.

‘I am giving you ample time,’ said Mr Burke, ‘to present yourselves on opening day in a manner which will do us and yourselves credit. You now have a full fortnight in which to get school blazers cleaned, grey flannel trousers pressed and school ties bought (if yours looks like some I have seen lately). On the day, every boy will be personally inspected by his form master. Any boy falling short of what is expected of him so far as his appearance is concerned will be referred to *me*. Shoes are to shine, hair is to be trimmed and then well brushed to present a tidy appearance, and I need hardly say that a clean shirt and a sweater free of the ravages of the moth’s tooth and Old Father Time are *de rigueur*. Every boy will also come provided with a clean pocket handkerchief. We need no midshipmen here. Right? First-year boys, lead off.’

So far as the senior master in a boys’ school can be popular, Mr Burke was well liked and his remark about ‘the moth’s tooth and Old Father Time’ had gone down well — a little too well, in fact, for the comfort of Mr Scaife and other inexperienced masters.

‘Sir, do moths *have* teeth, sir?’

‘How could they eat, you ass, if they didn’t have teeth? They couldn’t, could they, sir?’

‘Tortoises don’t have teeth. I’ve got one, so I know.’

‘Sir, if a moth got into Old Father Time’s beard, would it nest there, sir?’

‘Do spiders eat moths, sir, as well as flies?’

‘No, you ass! Spiders eat their mates.’

‘Sir, are spiders cannibals, then? Cor! Suppose my mum ate my dad!’

‘Do cannibals eat their own family, sir, or only their friends and enemies?’

‘Pity someone doesn’t eat *you*!’

‘Sir, why did Mr Burke talk about midshipmen, sir?’

‘Snotties, you fool. Don’t you know any history? I bet you haven’t even got a clean handkerchief!’

This humming from the hornets’ nest came to an end with the entrance of Margaret Wirrell with a message from the headmaster for Mr Scaife. Would Mr Scaife please set his form to work and go down to Mr Ronsonby’s office.

Mr Scaife gladly complied, leaving his form captain in charge of the class, but his relief at being able to leave his devil’s brood behind him was short-lived.

‘What does he want me for?’ he asked, when he and Margaret were in the corridor. Her answer was hardly reassuring.

‘Parent.’

‘Oh, Lord! Irate?’

‘I expect so. They don’t come up for much else.’

‘This is Mr Scaife,’ said the headmaster. ‘Scaife, this is Mr Travis.’

Mr Travis, full of bluster, as nervous parents often are when they come to a school with a complaint, burst out, ‘Why wasn’t I told my boy was not at school? He’s playing hooky, I suppose.’

‘I have no idea,’ said Mr Scaife. ‘I do my job, which is to mark a boy absent and wait for a note from his parents. Travis was not present on Monday and has failed to turn up again this morning. I was about to report to Mr Ronsonby that I had received no note from you when I was asked to come down to his room.’

‘You must have guessed Donald was truanting. Why wasn’t I notified?’

‘My dear Mr Travis,’ said Mr Ronsonby, ‘it is no part of Mr Scaife’s duties to report absentees to their parents unless the circumstances are special or suspicious. Your son is not a troublesome boy. There was no reason for us to assume that you were not aware of his absence from school’

‘Young monkey left me a note to say he was going camping for a few days and spending Sunday night at his aunt’s place, and that he would come straight to school from there on Monday morning.’

‘He probably did stay with his aunt,’ said Mr Scaife. ‘Why don’t you ask her?’

‘Of course I’ve asked her. Well, I’ll tell you one thing. You had better know that I’ve been to the police, that’s what I’ve done. His mother’s nearly off her head with worry and I’ve lost a morning’s work coming here.’

‘Been to the police?’ said Mr Ronsonby, who hoped he had seen the last of them at least until the adjourned inquest on Mr Pythias had taken place.

‘When Donald didn’t come home from school last night I came up here at seven, but I couldn’t get in, so I rang, but there was no answer.’

‘The caretaker’s cottage really ought to be on the telephone,’ said Mr Ronsonby, ‘but the charges are extremely high and the education committee were not satisfied that a caretaker’s telephone would be used solely for school business. There is nobody at the school office after about five o’clock on a Monday.’

‘How do I know what’s happened to my boy if nobody notifies me he isn’t at school? It’s disgraceful, that’s what it is! In school time my boy is your responsibility.’

‘Look, Mr Travis,’ said Scaife, ‘I’m very sorry you’re so worried, but I really don’t think you can blame us if Donald is playing truant.’

‘Had a murder here already, haven’t you? How do I know my boy is still safe?’

‘Well, for one thing — ’ Mr Scaife hesitated, not at all sure that he was on safe ground.

‘Go on, Scaife,’ said the headmaster. ‘Tell us anything which may help.’

‘Well, Headmaster, I think Travis is safe enough so long as he had a companion with him. Young Maycock —’

‘Of course he did! We know all that, and Mrs Maycock is with my wife now. Mrs Maycock is a one-parent family. She and my wife are both out of their minds with worry. I have been in touch with Donald’s aunt. She knows nothing, either, as I told you.’

‘Well, if the matter is in the hands of the police there will soon be some news,’ said Mr Ronsonby.

‘Has anybody been to the place where the boys were thought to be camping?’ asked Mr Scaife.

‘Of course they have. I took the police there first thing this morning. Nothing to be seen, not even the ashes of a camp fire. Nothing! If I find my boy has been lying to me and they camped somewhere else, I’ll kill him when I get hold of him. He never asked me for permission to go camping. Just left a note. Look here, I want to question the other boys in Donald’s class. Some of them must be in the know and can tell me what he’s been up to.’

‘Any questioning will be done by myself, Mr Scaife and the police. I cannot possibly allow you to go into a form room during school hours and question the boys,’ said Mr Ronsonby. ‘It is against all school rules.’

‘We’ll see about that!’

‘What I *am* prepared to do,’ continued Mr Ronsonby, ‘is to send for the form captain and let you speak to him down here.’ He spoke to Margaret Wirrell and in a few moments there was a tap on the headmaster’s door. ‘Well, Spens,’ said Mr Ronsonby, ‘don’t look alarmed, boy. There is nothing to be afraid of. I expect that in Mr Scaife’s temporary absence from the form room, information, speculation and a good deal of ribaldry have been flying around. What have you to tell us about the absence of Travis and Maycock? This is Travis’s father. Apparently Travis did not return home after his camping holiday with Maycock and naturally we are all wondering where the two boys can be.’

The boy turned to Scaife. ‘That was all rot about the union, sir. Everybody expected Travis and Maycock back yesterday with the rest of us, sir. Potter was only having his bit of fun with you when he mentioned the union, sir.’

‘I’ll have my bit of fun with *him* later on,’ said Mr Scaife grimly. ‘Where were Travis and Maycock camping? Do you know?’

‘Stemlees Bottom on the moor, sir — or so we thought. But some of the chaps — the other boys, sir — went along there on Saturday and there wasn’t any sign of them or any other of our form.’

‘So Donald *was* lying!’ said Mr Travis. ‘I’ll skin him alive!’

The boy appeared to be about to say something more, but Margaret Wirrell tapped and came in at this point to state that Detective-Inspector Routh had arrived.

‘Ask him to come in,’ said Mr Ronsonby.

Routh was shown in and, kindly but ruthlessly, made short work of Mr Travis. ‘Now just you go home and take it easy,’ he said. ‘We’ve got everything in hand. You go home and tell your wife not to worry. We’ll soon have your boy back with you. He and his mate are only playing hooky, you’ll find.’

‘There’s been murder done here already,’ said Travis, looking suddenly strained instead of angry. ‘How do I know my boy is safe? He’s never truanted in his life and, so far as I know, he has never lied to me before, no, nor has he ever gone off without permission. It isn’t like him.’

‘There’s a first time for everything, especially with adolescent boys, Mr Travis. You go home. Your wife can do with you and *we* can do everything that’s necessary. As for the death of Mr Pythias, there was a reason, as you’ll have read in the papers. The unfortunate gentleman was carrying a large sum of money and was mugged and killed for it. Your son is just being a naughty lad and kicking over the traces a bit, that’s all. You skelp him when we bring him home and then you can forget all about it.’

‘I don’t like it,’ said Mr Ronsonby when Travis, muttering and shaking his head, had been ushered out and Scaife and his form captain had gone back to a mysteriously quiet classroom. ‘Travis and Maycock are the boys who bluffed Sparshott into unlocking the school that last time we had intruders. Suppose they recognised those men? They could be in deadly danger.’

‘The sooner we find them the better, sir, I agree. Of course there’s nothing to show that those men were the murderers, but there’s no doubt they broke into the school and the evidence we have is that their purpose could have been to dig up the body and transfer it to a safer place when they heard a fishpond was going to be put there.’

‘What puzzles me, if that is so, is how they came to know that a pond was to be sunk in the quad. Nobody was aware of it at that stage except myself and my

staff. The boys did not know. Even Sparshott did not know.'

'The governors of the school, sir? One of them may have broadcast the plan.'

'I am sure they would have wanted to keep the nature of their gift a secret until it was a *fait accompli*.'

'I wonder whether I might have a word with Sparshott's son? I believe he is one of your scholars, sir, and he was present when his father was told of the last break-in.'

Young Sparshott, a fine, tall lad with the first faint indications of a moustache which he hoped, but did not expect, that the headmaster would allow him to cultivate during this, his last term at school, stood to attention and said, 'Sir?' in the firm voice he was practising for when he joined the police cadets later on.

'Give your attention to Detective-Inspector Routh, if you please, Sparshott.'

'Well, Ron,' said Routh, 'I'm hoping you can help me. You remember two of the younger boys coming to your home some little time back with a story that there were intruders in the school?'

'Yes. They turned out to be right.'

'You went with your father to investigate.'

'Yes, but I had orders to stay on the front steps while he went in with the dog.'

'The two men made their escape by way of the open front door. They must have passed you. Did you recognise either of them?'

'I didn't have a chance. They rushed past me and knocked me flying.'

'You have no idea who they were?'

'Not a clue, I'm afraid.'

'Thank you, Ron. That's all,' said Routh. He added to Mr Ronsonby when the boy had gone, 'I don't think there's much cause for anxiety, sir. If a lad of that age and on the *qui vive* didn't have a chance to spot those men, it isn't likely that two younger boys had any chance to recognise anybody.'

'I hope you are right. The thing is that this unexplained absence is so unlike these particular boys. Both have good homes and caring parents and neither, so far as I know, has posed any problems here at school. No, I don't like it. I refused permission to Mr Travis to question Mr Scaife's form, but a police investigation is a different matter and I am willing, nay, anxious, that you shall obtain any information from the second-year boys which they may be able to impart, if it will help you.'

'Worth a try, sir.'

It may or may not have been worth a try, but the fact remained that it produced no results. Routh reported to the headmaster that his questions had got him nowhere.

‘Then I think you may take it that the boys have no information to give you,’ said Mr Ronsonby. ‘However, I shall know more about that when I have questioned them myself. They all know about the discovery of Pythias’s murdered body. It was impossible to keep such knowledge from them. Not only were the facts reported in two local and most of the daily papers, but they must have been the subject of discussion and speculation in every household in the town. Boys, on the whole, are callous, cruel, brutal and thoughtless creatures, and I do not suppose that, hard as we try to inculcate some semblance of civilised behaviour, my boys are very different from the norm. However, because of the murder and the consequent horror it has brought — you might not be surprised to hear that I have had a number of parents up to see me on the score of removing their boys from my school — there is a very uneasy spirit abroad among parents, pupils and masters and—’

‘You mean that, if these second-year boys knew anything of the whereabouts of Travis and Maycock, they would have come across with it p.d.q., if you’ll pardon the expression, sir. I agree with you.’

‘Quite. Under ordinary circumstances boys are past-masters at becoming as dumb as oysters when they are called upon to betray one another’s secrets, but we find ourselves in any but ordinary circumstances and I must admit that I share fully in Mr Travis’s anxiety.’

To emphasise the gravity of the occasion, he put on his BA gown with the hood lined with peacock blue, a garment he reserved ordinarily for speech days and the opening and closing assemblies of each school term. However, neither his majestic trappings nor his authoritative questions produced anything helpful except a diffident hand held up by a thin, pale, straw-haired boy in the second row.

‘Yes, Carter?’

‘Please, sir, Maycock borrowed my bike — my bicycle, sir — the Saturday before we broke up.’

‘That was some weeks ago. Are you complaining that he still has it, wherever he is?’

‘Please, sir, no. His own bi-bicycle — had got a puncture and he said he wanted to go to see his aunt.’

‘So you got your bicycle back, then?’

‘Oh, yes, sir, the same night.’

‘Thank you, Carter, but how do you think this will help us?’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘Never mind. You were right to mention a bicycle. You have no idea of where it was that the two boys proposed to set up this camp I have heard about?’

‘No, sir, except I don’t think it was at Stemlees Bottom, sir. That’s where people usually camp out.’

‘We have been given that information. Unless you know something more than that, you may sit down.’

‘Please, sir, my bike — bicycle — was — well, the saddlebag was soaking wet, sir, as if the bicycle had been ridden into a watersplash or something, and there isn’t anything like that between where Maycock lives and that part of the moor round Stemlees Bottom. I wondered if Maycock spent that day sort of prospecting, sir.’

‘It’s a clue of a sort, even if a very slender one,’ said Routh, when they had left the form room to return to the headmaster’s office. ‘Anyway, it’s all we’ve got, so I’ll get to work on it. A watersplash? Not very helpful. Could equally well have been a small brook or a waterlogged ditch. Mind if I go back to that room, sir, and put one more question to that lad?’ Without waiting for an answer, he turned about, ran up the stairs, tapped at Mr Scaife’s door and entered a classroom which had emerged from the holy stillness engendered by the presence of the headmaster into a cacophony of shouting, argument, questions and banging on desks. Mr Scaife had been adding to the din in an effort to shout everybody else down and restore order.

As soon as Routh was noticed, the noise stopped. Boys who had been standing in the gangways the better to get their views across, sat down. Boys who had been stamping their feet gave themselves a rest. Boys who had been beating a tattoo with rulers put these down. Mr Scaife, who had given up a hopeless struggle, took his head out of his hands to see to what he owed the restoration of peace and sanity.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘it’s you again, Inspector.’

‘Another word with Carter, if I may, sir. Now, Carter, when you got your bike back, the saddlebag — what kind of saddlebag would that be?’

‘The useful kind. It hung down from the crossbar. It’s a proper touring bike and nearly new. I only had it for Christmas.’

‘Maycock borrowed it, and told you he was going to visit his aunt, and you don’t think he went to Stemlees Bottom. Tell me, was your bike muddy as well

as wet when he returned it?’

‘No, but the water hasn’t done my saddlebag any good.’

‘So you don’t think he had ridden it into a ditch?’

‘No. It would have been muddy all up the wheels and it wasn’t.’

‘So you deduced a watersplash. Good for you. We shall need you in the force before long.’ Routh heard the noise break out again as soon as he was in the corridor. He returned to the headmaster, thanked him and departed. He was well acquainted with the environs and he knew of two watersplashes, both well within cycling distance of the town. One was in the next village, but there was no need whatever to push or ride a bicycle through it. Cars were obliged to take to the water, but there was a handy wooden footbridge which cyclists and pedestrians could use.

The other watersplash was further off and was at what Routh called ‘the back of beyond’. Here again, however, there was a footbridge. In wet weather the splash could be as much as five feet deep, for it lay in a dip in a country road at the foot of a steep gradient. A packhorse bridge had been built high up at the side of it, however, a couple of centuries previously.

‘I don’t think a watersplash is the answer,’ Routh said to Detective-Sergeant Bennett, ‘but it’s the only clue we’ve got, so we’ll take a posse and some dogs and see what we can turn up. I don’t suppose there’s much to worry about. All the same, the boys were in school the night those chaps broke the washroom window and got into the quad. They might have recognised somebody even if young Sparshott didn’t, so we’ve got to find them and make sure they’re all right.’

At the Sir George Etherege school Mr Ronsonby addressed himself to his secretary. ‘I’m extremely worried about those missing boys,’ he said. ‘What do you think we can do?’

‘Ask Dame Beatrice to find them for us,’ said Margaret Wirrell.

13

Writers and Painters



Mr Ronsonby has lost two boys,' said Dame Beatrice to Laura Gavin. 'From your tone I don't think you mean that two of his own sons have died. It must be to do with the school.'

'How perceptive you are! Yes, the two young boys who managed to bamboozle the caretaker into admitting them to the school after hours have disappeared. Mr Ronsonby wants us to find them.'

'Don't the other boys know what they are up to? Boys usually know that sort of thing about one another. Are they truanting?'

'It appears that they bear an unblemished reputation.'

'Then they are certain to be villains! There is no such thing as a boy with a genuinely unblemished reputation. What's the story?'

'The boys were present when (it is now assumed) two men, having broken into the school, began to disinter the body of Mr Pythias. It is now the beginning of the summer term and these two boys have failed to turn up at school. They are supposed to have camped out on the heath for a few days, but nothing more has been heard of them. Their parents and Mr Ronsonby are extremely worried and the police have been notified.'

'Doesn't sound too good, does it? If those two men were trying to dig up the body and the boys recognised them, the men might not feel safe while the boys are still alive. But what does Ronsonby think *we* can do about it? The police have all the facilities that we haven't got. They will quarter the moor and search every last inch of it; they'll drag the river and they'll make house-to-house enquiries. We can only get the car out and help to search the moor, but less effectively than they can, and they may not appreciate our help, anyway.'

'I think there must be some evidence at the school which perhaps we could unearth.'

'I bet there is, but if the other boys haven't given it to the police, they are not likely to give it to us.'

‘Mr Ronsonby says the location of the campsite which the two boys gave to their classmates is not the place where they seem to have camped. He refers to second-year boys. How old would they be?’

‘First years are eleven to twelve, so second years would be twelve to thirteen — nearer thirteen at this end of the school year. I’ll tell you what! It’s a very long shot, but from my memories of the short time I spent as a mentor and preceptor, I recollect what hell the last couple of days of the term could be. Everyone on the staff is longing for breaking-up afternoon or else for a sub-machine gun to pick off the class one by one, but you had to hang on to your sanity and in desperation you set them work to do which they and you both knew would never be looked at, let alone marked. There wouldn’t be any specialisation, either, for at least that last couple of days, so you would be stuck with your own mob from nine until four while you were trying to make out reports and lists. It was hell, as I remember it.’

‘I see what you mean, I think. I am not referring to your last remark, but to the fact that somewhere among this litter of unread and grudgingly produced exercises there may be a clue to the real holiday intentions of the missing boys.’

‘I said it was a long shot, and it certainly is.’

‘I see only one difficulty. If the teacher had no intention of reading the work, it would hardly have been done in a regular exercise book, would it?’

‘Oh, no, of course it wouldn’t. In that case it would *have* to be marked. In my time it was always done on odd sheets of paper torn out of old exercises books.’

‘A clear indication of the ephemeral nature of the end product. That brings me to my point. Would not all such sheets of paper have been thrown away on the last day of the term?’

‘Probably not. Most teachers would try to hoodwink the class by bunging the papers into a drawer as though for future reference.’

It was true that specialisation was discontinued during the last couple of days of term at the Sir George Etherege school, but the younger masters had their own ways of getting through the time without the loss of their own or their pupils’ lives. They made private arrangements to swap classes.

The masters most in request were the junior English master — ‘you can find ’em something to read, can’t you? — or you can read aloud to them or something?’; Mr Pybus, the art master — ‘kids are always happy splashing paint about, so do us a favour, Pybie’; and the music master, Mr Phillips, who, although he ranked as senior staff, was always willing to get rid of his own boys and hold gramophone sessions for the boys of others’. The other member of the

syndicate was the master who took PE and games. Having no classroom resources, he was an enthusiast for the swap-classes method of getting through the dreaded end of term.

Mr Ronsonby was well aware that these transactions and plottings went on and he had no objection to closing a blind eye to them. In any case, the swap-shop could flourish only on a limited basis and among only a few of his staff. In fact, it was better, he thought, to wink at these unofficial exchanges rather than to put up with the anarchy which he knew would prevail in certain classrooms if a weak teacher was left for several hours in charge of the same set of boys. If this happened, he knew that it would result in boys being sent down to him for punishment just when he was at his busiest and least anxious to be disturbed.

Dame Beatrice's telephone call found him in conference with Mr Burke and Margaret Wirrell. They were going over the lists of primary-school children who were expecting transference to the Sir George Etherege building at the beginning of the autumn term.

Just before Dame Beatrice's telephone call came through, Margaret had made coffee for Mr Ronsonby, Mr Burke and herself and Mr Ronsonby had been retailing an amusing anecdote concerning a Catholic junior school which sent a consignment of eleven- to twelve-year-olds to him each September, there being no senior school of their own persuasion in the neighbourhood.

'You know that our custom is to ask the junior-school heads to come up and see me?' he said. 'Of course, when the little boys arrive at the beginning of term they are set an English and a maths test so that we can grade them according to our own ideas and standards, but as a matter of courtesy I always ask the head teacher to place the boys in what the junior school considers to be their order of merit.'

'Well, the head of St Saviour's happens to be a nun, so when I handed her the list she had sent in to us and asked her to ignore the fact that the names were in alphabetical order and to assess the children she was sending, she refused to look at it. "Oh, Mr Ronsonby," she said, "nobody but the good Lord could place these children in order of merit." '

Mr Burke, who had already heard the story, laughed dutifully.

'Oh, well, the junior-school assessments often don't agree with ours,' he said, 'so she was probably on a non-collision course there.'

It was at this point that Margaret took Dame Beatrice's call.

'Dame Beatrice wants to know whether the second-year boys wrote essays at the end of the term,' she said, 'and especially whether Maycock and Travis did

any work on paper.'

'Sure to have done,' said Mr Burke. 'Moreover, from staffroom gossip, I happen to know that Waite, who takes the second years for English, set the essays and Pybus got the boys to illustrate them, and that both the compositions and the pictures were then handed over to Scaife as the form master, so, unless he has thrown them away, they are still in his cupboard.'

'Pybus, eh? What a good-natured man he is, to help the younger fellows!' said Mr Ronsonby, who knew full well that, far from being good-natured enough to help the junior masters, Mr Pybus was concerned only to get shot of his own form, who neither liked nor respected him and called him, almost to his face, Old Piebald, a slighting reference to his receding hair. The school's nickname for Mr Pythias had been the Old Python, but this was a tribute, in its way, to a strong disciplinarian of whom it was as well to be wary.

The result of the telephone conversation was that Margaret Wirrell was sent up to Mr Scaife's room. Here she found him in argument with a boy about the desirability of having to prove that a triangle having the same base and height as a rectangle must of necessity have an area half that of the rectangle in question.

'It's obvious to the naked eye, sir,' said the boy, 'so why do we have to waste time proving it?'

The form, as always, had risen when Margaret came in. ('And I hope you do the same at home when your mother, aunt or any other lady comes into a room,' was Mr Ronsonby's admonition when he addressed a class of boys new to his school.)

'Good morning, Mr Scaife. Good morning, 2A,' said Margaret. 'We've just had a tinkle from Dame Beatrice Lestrangle Bradley,' she told Mr Scaife, 'and —'

'Keep your flapping ears close to your head, Preston! Nothing to do with you what is being said,' rapped out Mr Scaife to a small boy in the front row.

'— and she wants to know whether you set any work to be done on paper or in their rough-work books at the end of last term. Not exercise-book things, but, well, you know, end-of-term work.'

'Mr Waite and Mr Pybus did, sir, and they gave you our paintings and essays,' said the listener.

'Really, Preston, how interesting! But really I have no need of your good offices,' snapped Mr Scaife.

'They're in the left-hand drawer of your table, sir.'

'Preston! Shut up!'

‘Only trying to be helpful, sir.’

‘Forget it!’ Mr Scaife wrenched open the left-hand drawer of the teacher’s table, abstracted bundles of exercise-book paper and half-sheets of drawing paper, ignored a *sotto voce* ‘I told you, didn’t I?’ from the windmill-eared Preston, and handed the bundles to Margaret. A boy opened the door for her, the form stood up again, and Margaret went back to Mr Ronsonby and Mr Burke, leaving Mr Scaife (judging from the noise which followed her departure) facing a den of lions.

‘Do you want me to take these to the Stone House?’ she asked the headmaster, indicating her haul.

‘Not until we have rung to tell Dame Beatrice that we think we have found what she asked for.’

Upon receipt of this news, Dame Beatrice said that Mrs Gavin would call and collect the papers during the course of the afternoon, and this Laura did and needed to waste none of Mr Ronsonby’s time because Margaret way-laid her in the vestibule and handed over the papers which were now in two carrier bags.

After tea, Dame Beatrice and Laura went through the papers and laid aside the essays and paintings signed by Travis and Maycock. These would receive special attention, but the rest of the collection could not be ignored in case it should reveal any clue to the whereabouts of the missing campers.

The essays ranged from the anticipatory to the disillusioned. Some were lively, some dull, some badly written, some badly spelt. A few were factual and, having described, either joyously or the reverse, Easter holidays of the past, had concluded that ‘It will be much the same this year, I expect, but I like Christmas better because an Easter egg is not so good as a model railway or a bike, though hot cross buns are all right’.

In the majority of cases it was clear that the writer did not expect that the eye of authority would ever peruse his script. One boy had written, ‘I do not expect to have much of a holiday because I never do have much of a holiday. I live with my aunt who is always having babys I hate babys my aunt says babys are a blessing if they are so is having a sore bum when youve been tanned or leprosy or a broken leg or something so I do not have much to tell you about my holiday so I will pretend and tell you I am a clergyman and tell you about all the people I have buried one was buried alive but I did not know till the relations told me and all the babys I have cristend and the baby I dropped in the font the water was rather deep and I dropped him he was my aunts baby I did not mean to do it he just slipped through my fingers all I shall really do in the holidays is take him

out in his pram perhaps it will tip over when I get to the river but I will be talking to Empty and pretend not to notice I like to think of dead people including lots of babys I hate babys.'

'A bright lad,' said Laura.

'Yes, one with a future in the writing of horror films,' said Dame Beatrice. 'Let us follow still further the workings of the Herodian mind of this Master Alan Prouding.'

'I wonder who Empty is?' said Laura.

'In due course we may be able to find out. I deduce that he has a classmate whose initials are M and TV.

'As simple as that?'

'The minds of villains are often much simpler than we think. They learn as soon as they can walk that the shortest distance between two points lies along a straight line.' The essay they were reading went on:

'If its wet in the hols I shall write some annimos letters these are good fun and stir people up no end because everybody has got a skeleton of some sort in their cubbard which they would not like anybody else to know about and people who are always bumming about seeing the school murderer are just asking for it.'

'Empty? M and T,' said Laura. 'Two boys, not one. Maycock and Travis, don't you think? And this young beauty *did* write them an anonymous letter purporting (if my instinct for spotting youthful depravity has not deserted me) to come from the murderers of Mr Pythias. It looks as though Prouding waited until the two boys were going off to their camp before he posted or otherwise delivered the letter. *I* think Maycock and Travis have taken fright at the anonymous letter and scarpered, don't you?'

'Yes, I do. I think we must ask the headmaster to allow us to have a word with Master Prouding. He appears to be a practical joker of some magnitude,' said Dame Beatrice. 'It looks as though this essay may disperse any fears that the two boys have been kidnapped or murdered. All the police have to do now is to find out where they have gone. If they have run away, where would boys of that age be most likely to make for?'

'Oh, the docks at Southampton. I expect they would prefer to make it an airport and smuggle themselves on to a plane, but they would be old enough to realise that to get on board a ship would be much easier.'

'Is there a painting to accompany Master Prouding's essay?'

'Yes,' said Laura, turning it up, 'but it's only a skeleton with a balloon

coming out of its mouth saying, "Dead men do tell tales". Rather a disappointment after Proudning's fascinating book of words.'

'Well, we had better look at the work of Maycock and Travis before we go to the headmaster. I expect little help from their essays, for words are often but the wrapping papers of truth. Art is a window to the soul.'

'Through a glass darkly,' said Laura.

Travis's written account was dull and made no mention of the proposed camp. His painting, boldly executed, depicted a Red Indian settlement of teepees and totem poles. In the foreground were Red Indian braves flourishing their tomahawks in a war dance. They wore brilliantly coloured feathered head-dresses which reached almost to their heels and fringed shirts which somewhat ineffectively disguised the fact that the artist knew little of the technique of sketching the human body. He had also attempted to portray a chief on horseback, but with very little success. The caption appeared to be of no significance. It read, 'Waiting for Paleface woman with papoose at Blackstone Creek'.

Maycock's work was of no more assistance. His essay had almost ignored the set subject and concerned itself only with Maycock's theory about the best use to be made of the atom bomb.

'This leethal weppon,' wrote Maycock, 'could be used for a good cause which is to break up the polar ice at North and South Poles and get furtille land so all the Third World and anybody else who is starving can grow their rice and have something to eat it only needs waterlogged ground and you would have plenty of that at the Poles if you melted the ice and got the salt out. I shall spend most of my holiday working out this idea which nobody else seems to have thought of and might win the Nobel Prize. Of course you would have to rescue all the polar bears and seals and pengwins and things before you let off the bomb and then wait for the fumes to die down and this might take some time.'

His painting was of the blessing which was to be wrought for the benefit of the Third World. A violent explosion lit up a helicopter from whose safety-line an animal dimly recognisable as a polar bear was dangling. The caption on the reverse side of the half-sheet of drawing paper read, 'I do not have time to paint more animals in the picture but the polar bears and seals and pengwins and things would be rescued before the bomb was let off that is only commonsense'.

'Thank goodness for one humanitarian,' said Laura. 'It's a change from young Mohawk Proudning, anyway.'

'A young gentleman with whom, if Mr Ronsonby will permit it, we must

now talk. It looks as though Travis, if not Maycock, had intended to camp on the moor and had told his classmates so.'

Laura had formed two mental pictures of young Proudning. One was of a cunning, furtive child with eyes which never met those of a questioner; the other of a cherubic, baby-faced youngster, the prototype of a fallen angel. Master Proudning resembled neither of these visions. He was a slant-eyed faun with the lascivious lips of the Sphinx in the Acropolis museum. His mouth, when he entered the headmaster's office, wore a propitiatory half-smile, as of one who anticipates trouble and is anxious to avoid it.

'Please, sir, you wanted me, sir?' he said.

'In point of fact, *I* can do without you very nicely,' said Mr Ronsonby. 'You seem to be a very silly little boy. These ladies would like to put a few questions to you concerning the non-appearance of Travis and Maycock this term.'

'I don't know anything about that, sir.'

Dame Beatrice produced a sheet of paper.

'This document appears to bear your signature,' she said.

'Oh, please, sir!' said Proudning, appealing to his headmaster. 'It was only a lot of rot, sir. I never meant a word of it.'

'Address yourself to Dame Beatrice, boy.'

'Yes, sir. Please, madam, I don't live with my aunt and I *never* have to take babies out in prams and truly I have never drowned one or buried people alive or anything.'

'Oh, as to that, Mr Proudning, we are in sympathy with most of the views you have expressed in your essay. What we should like you to explain is the passage which reads, "I shall write some anonymous letters. People who are always bumming about seeing the school murderer are asking for it." Please tell us what you meant by "asking for it".'

'I didn't mean anything.'

'Well, retreat into your shell if you think it best,' said Dame Beatrice, 'but to confide in us may save a great amount of time and trouble later on.'

'We got a bit sick of being told they'd seen the murderers when we knew jolly well they hadn't. If they had, the murderers would have murdered them before this. Murderers always murder people they think might recognise them.'

'So you wrote an anonymous letter purporting to come from the murderers because you were tired of the boastings of Travis and Maycock. Yes, I see.'

'It was only a joke, honest it was.'

'You need to minimise your sense of humour, Mr Proudning, before it gets

you into trouble. I will say no more.'

'Off you go then, Proudling,' said Mr Ronsonby, 'and don't be so stupid again. I shall deal with you later.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.' There was present now no follower of Pan, but only a small boy who could not escape quickly enough from the headmaster's presence.

Mr Ronsonby asked, 'What else can I do for you, Dame Beatrice? Thank goodness it seems more likely that the two boys have run away than that they have been kidnapped or worse.'

14

Hounds in Cry



The trouble is,' said Laura, when she and Dame Beatrice were at home again, 'we still don't know whether those two boys have run away because of that young fathead's anonymous letter, or whether the murderers have got hold of them, because I suppose that is still a possibility.'

'All that we can do has been done. We have given the police this new theory and directed their attention to Southampton. They must do the rest. A description of the lads has been circulated and their photographs displayed outside police stations and in the press. The police will have found out from their parents what they would have been wearing and what they are likely to have taken with them. There is nothing we ourselves can do now but wait.'

'Except that there is still Mr Pythias to think about — not that thinking gets me personally much further.'

'To go back to your first remark, one thing strikes me. It seems that the boys went camping without parental permission and did not leave home until the last weekend of the holiday, yet other boys in their form knew, before the term ended, that the plan to go camping had been made. I think I would like to talk to Mrs (not Mr) Travis. It looks as though holiday plans had been made by the parents for one, if not both, of the boys, so that they were not free to please themselves what they did until that last weekend. We shall obtain a more detailed account from Travis's mother than from his father, I think, and Mrs Maycock may be able to add her quota. In any case, the two may be glad to have one another's support at our interview with them. I suppose we shall have to talk with them at the school. Ring Mr Ronsonby tomorrow morning and see what he has to say.'

Mr Ronsonby's reply was that he would be delighted to arrange anything which might help in tracing the boys and that Margaret would ring back when she had contacted the mothers and arranged the meeting. The next telephone call came from the school secretary. Mrs Travis and Mrs Maycock were willing and

anxious to co-operate in any way they could and, if the notice was not too short for Dame Beatrice, they would present themselves at the school at half-past two on the following afternoon.

‘I do hope something will come of it,’ said Margaret. ‘I’m quite worried about poor Mr Ronsonby. What with these two naughty boys and the official opening, he’s nearly badgered to death. There are the parents, the staff, the police and the governors all on his neck over one thing and another. I just hope he doesn’t end up with a breakdown.’

‘Well, it’s women who go mad in white satin. Men only cut their own throats,’ said Laura, reporting to Dame Beatrice. ‘Half-past two means that we had better stop off for lunch on our way to the school.’

Mr Ronsonby met them in the vestibule and told them that the two mothers had arrived.

‘Burke has put his sixth in the library,’ he said, ‘and he and I will be busy making what I hope will be the final arrangements for the opening. His form room, therefore, is at your disposal and Margaret has put the mothers in there. She will show you the way.’ Margaret did this and made the necessary introductions before she left the four women together. What came out at the interview was that the Travis family, father, mother and only son, had booked a caravan at a place called Carvel Bay and that Mr Travis could only stay over the Easter weekend, but that Mrs Travis and Donald, with young Bob Maycock as their guest, were to stay for another ten days to finish out the fortnight’s booking. This accounted for the weekend the boys had fixed to go camping. Neither could have gone earlier.

‘I suppose, come to think of it — only, of course, you don’t think of these things at the time,’ said Mrs Travis, ‘Donald did throw out one or two hints, but they meant nothing to me. I don’t believe, all the same, that he would have gone off like that without saying anything, except to leave a note, unless something had happened which we don’t know about. Besides, he didn’t take his bike.’

‘Bob didn’t take his, either,’ said Mrs Maycock.

‘Did he receive a letter after you had come home from your caravan holiday?’ asked Dame Beatrice.

‘Yes, a note had been pushed through our letterbox. I thought it was only from one of the boys at school asking him to go fishing or something, so we thought no more of it.’

‘Did he appear disturbed in any way when he had read the note? We know, you see, Mrs Travis, that it was an anonymous letter written by a mischievous

boy in his class and it may have alarmed him.'

'I wasn't with him when he read it. He took it up to his bedroom when he put away his holiday gear.'

'Did he tell you it was an invitation from a schoolfellow?'

'No. Both boys seemed a bit quiet at supper that evening and next morning, of course, they had gone; the next thing was that his father found Donald's note which said they had gone camping and would spend the Sunday night at his aunt's and go back to school from there.'

'How did your husband react when he read the note?'

'He called Donald a young monkey and said he supposed the child knew he wouldn't have been given permission at that time of year to go camping unless it was with the Scouts or something else properly organised, and that he supposed it was natural for a boy of Donald's age to kick over the traces now and again. It wasn't until Donald didn't come home from school on the Monday that anybody began to worry.'

'You will have told the police what Donald was wearing, of course.'

'Yes, his jeans and a sweater and his school blazer and a dark blue waterproof and his school cap.'

'The boys did not take a tent with them, I imagine.'

'In the note Donald said they had got permission to sleep in a barn. I think just at first his father was rather pleased he should show his independence. It was a pity Donald had to tell such lies, though.'

'I understand that your husband searched that part of the moor where he supposed the boys had made camp, but found no trace of them.'

'Yes, that was after Donald didn't come home from school on the Monday. We thought he was playing truant and my husband was angry about that.'

The questions and answers continued for a while longer, but no new information was forthcoming except that Travis must have taken his post-office savings book with him, as his parents had been unable to find it in his room.

'That certainly looks as though the boys intended to run away,' said Laura, when, having accomplished nothing, she and Dame Beatrice were on their way home.

'Yes, undoubtedly. Moreover, the other missing article is also significant.'

'You mean the Ordnance map of the New Forest area. Mrs Travis said it was missing from her husband's collection.'

'I think the purloining of the map may be very important. It could indicate that the boys had the clear intention of running away, especially if Donald Travis

took his accredited capital with him.'

'If they are really running away and have pinched a map, Southampton is definitely the place they'd make for.'

'The police will try to find out whether a motorist or lorry driver gave the lads a lift. They would hardly think of walking all the way to Southampton if they could get transport,' said Laura.

'Young boys might find it difficult to thumb a lift, as I believe it is called.'

'Yes, it takes bone-headed, gormless girls to make a success of the gesturing thumb and the display of shapely limb, I suppose,' said Laura.

'Southampton?' said Routh, when he heard Laura's theory. 'Ship aboard as cabin boys? That could well be their idea, Mrs Gavin. It's still a young boy's dream, I suppose, to run away to sea, even in these days. One thing, they are hardly likely to realise their ambition and, that being so, they'll be left out on a limb unless they do the sensible thing and come straight home. They'll maybe get a tanning when they get back, and another from the headmaster, but that would be better than having somebody do an Oliver Twist on them.'

'How do you mean?'

'Oliver Twist fell among thieves, didn't he? There's plenty of scope for a thin young boy to be picked up by an experienced gang who prefer to make an illegal entry without breaking windows. A skinny little chap aged twelve or thirteen, like these two, could be put through an open bathroom or lavatory window to open up a house from the inside, if you see what I mean. Once these little lads find themselves left high and dry in a big town, they're easy money for professional cracksmen.'

'Well, you had better find them quickly, then.'

'I've got three squad cars out on different routes, ma'am, but no reports have come in yet. The trouble is that the young fools have got such a long start of us. They left home some time early on Saturday morning — perhaps late on Friday night. They could be anywhere by now and in anybody's hands. Young boys from this area and coming from decent homes haven't got the savvy of slum kids or London cock-sparrows. They mayn't be all that innocent, but ignorant of the world and its ways they undoubtedly are.'

'Is there anything *I* can do? I suppose not.'

'Best leave it to us, ma'am. We've got the resources.' An earlier broadcast appeal had soon brought a response from the public, some of it crackbrained, most of it unhelpful. A medium telephoned to say that she had seen 'two little bodies, like the Babes in the Wood, buried under leaves in the New Forest', but

gave no location. More reasonable news began to come in. A shopkeeper reported that on Saturday morning two boys had come in as soon as she opened and had bought buns, sweet biscuits and cans of soft drinks. Another shopkeeper reported a sale of cheese at around the same time to two boys of, he thought, the age specified in the broadcast.

The general opinion in the masters' common room was that a lot of fuss was being made over nothing and that the boys were playing truant and would return home when they had had enough of it or had spent all their money. The only member of staff who could have made a useful contribution was Mr Pybus, the art master, who had actually seen the boys on the road and spoken to them, but from whose woolgathering and narcissistic mind all recollection of the incident, which had also occurred on the Saturday, had vanished. Indeed, to do him justice, it is doubtful whether he had heard any of the comments which were made in the staffroom, since he spent most of the time when the staff gathered during the break or in part of the dinner-hour in sorting over the store of paintings, drawings and pottery which he kept ready for displaying to inspectors or, on open days, to the boys' parents. He proposed to stage a mammoth exhibition at the grand official opening and was planning what he hoped would be some pleasant surprises for the visitors which would bring him much credit and acclaim and perhaps would attract the attention of the local press.

A very definite clue, however, came to the police from a lorry driver who said that he had heard the broadcast and had seen, in the dusk of Saturday evening, two boys on the road to Cadnam in the New Forest. They said they were on their way to Southampton, where they told him they lived, and the driver had arranged for an empty coach following his lorry to give them a lift.

The search, thereupon, was focused on the port, although Sergeant Bennett said to Routh that he betted the boys had smuggled themselves on board a boat after all. There was news, however, at the central railway station. The same two boys had bought food at the station buffet more than once, and the girl who had served them had done so for the last time on the Sunday. Following this report there came a flood of information, much of it useless. The usual crop of psychopaths turned up, one of them even going to the police with a toupee which he declared he had snatched from the head of a boy who had stolen his watch and run away.

Less bizarre information came in and some far more credible stories. The boys had been seen sitting on a park bench talking to a woman. They had been seen down by the pier from which the Solent ferries to the Isle of Wight

departed. A woman remembered seeing two rumpled, rather dirty, very tired boys in the waiting room at the central station. This last statement buttressed that made by the girl at the buffet, but did nothing to push the enquiry further forward. There was no doubt that the boys had been in Southampton on the Sunday, but it was not until a post-office clerk telephoned to report that a boy named R. Travis had drawn money out on demand that the police learned that the boys had still been in Southampton on the Monday morning.

This seemed to narrow the search, but after the post-office report there was no more news to be had. Enquiries at three Southampton railway stations produced no evidence that the lads had bought tickets and taken a train — ‘although,’ said Routh, ‘I wouldn’t put it past a couple of boys to take platform tickets out of a slot machine, go through the barrier when a train was in and smuggle themselves on to it. If they did that, they could be anywhere by now, including Portsmouth or somewhere in Somerset or Devon.’

When Routh heard of the report by the post-office clerk, he drove to Southampton, where the Hampshire constabulary were making every effort to trace the missing boys. Leaving his car (which was his own and not a police vehicle) in a car park, he sought directions to the branch office where the clerk worked and interviewed her. She could tell him nothing more. One boy, not two, had come into the post-office, but she was sure of the name and had recorded it and she gave a description of the boy which fitted.

On his way back to the car park, Routh had to pass the shop window in which the notice of an exhibition of Mr Pybus’s paintings was displayed. He stopped and read the notice, looked at the picture beside it and felt sufficiently interested to go by way of Brockenhurst and the Stone House and call on Dame Beatrice instead of going straight back to the police station.

‘A pleasant surprise, Detective-Inspector,’ she said. ‘Do you bring news?’

‘Only of a negative nature, ma’am. That is to say there is no doubt those two lads have been in Southampton, but whether they are still there I have to leave to the locals to find out. It’s a big place and there doesn’t seem any particular line to go on. However, if they are still in the city, no doubt they’ll be winkled out in time. I really came about another matter. May I ask what you know about art, ma’am?’

‘Nothing at all, in the technical sense, Mr Routh. I resemble the honest British working man in the cartoon — I know what I like, and that is all.’

Routh took from his breast pocket the letter which Pythias had written to Mrs Buxton. He was not a superstitious man in the ordinary course of events, but he

carried the letter with him as a sort of talisman. He had a feeling that, in time, the letter would lead him to Pythias's murderer.

'I'm not sure whether I ever showed you this, ma'am,' he said, handing over the letter. 'The writing doesn't signify anything except that it wasn't the writer who sent back those cheques. It's the little sketch on the back.'

'Yes, you did show it to me on one occasion,' said Dame Beatrice. 'A very sensitive and evocative little drawing, is it not? So Mr Pythias was an artist as well as a geographer. But it is clear that the sketch has other importance.'

'It may have, or it may not, ma'am. I was in Southampton to make a few enquiries when I passed an art dealer's, and there in the middle of the window was a painting which I could swear was done by the same hand as this little sketch.'

'I suppose Mr Pythias sold his pictures when he could find a purchaser.'

'Ah, but the picture in the window and the exhibition of pictures which the shop was advertising had nothing to do with Mr Pythias, it seems. The notice credited the works to Mr Pybus.'

'And who is Mr Pybus?'

'He's the art master at the Sir George Etherege school, ma'am. I've interviewed all the staff there since Mr Pythias went missing, and this Mr Pybus was one of them. I recollect him particularly because of his name, it being in some respects a bit like Pythias.'

'So you want somebody to go along to this shop, visit the exhibition and confirm your suspicions that the paintings on view are the work of Mr Pythias, not of Mr Pybus. You would be wiser to consult an expert on the subject.'

'I'd like a bit of backing-up before I do that, ma'am.'

'Well, it sounds an attractive assignment and if, in carrying it out, Laura and I find any trace of the missing boys, I will let you know.'

15

The Runaways



Let's have another look at that letter,' said Maycock. The boys had returned from the caravan holiday on the Friday before school re-opened on the Monday, and the letter had been lying on the front-door mat. Mr Travis was still at work and his wife, having picked up the letter and looked at the envelope, said, 'Oh, no stamp. It's for you from one of your schoolfriends, I expect. Well, you can't go out to anybody's house this evening. There's all the unpacking to do and, anyway, you have Bob here and your father will expect you to stay in and tell him all about the holiday when he gets home.'

She went into the kitchen to get the tea and the two boys went upstairs to the bedroom they were sharing. Here Travis opened the letter.

'Oh, crikey!' he said, dismayed. The letter, like the envelope, was in printed capitals. It said, 'So you are wise to us, are you, you sneaking young swine well for once you have opened your silly mouths a bit to wide and we are wise to you so beware we have you in our sites and will stop at nothing you thought you could hide in a carravan but you will have to come home sometime and then we shall get you this is annimos letter but if you know who we are well you know who we are so watch out.'

'But we *don't* know who they are,' said Maycock, equally disconcerted. 'We never saw them, did we?'

'One of the chaps must have grassed on us. I bet it was that louse Preston. His tongue is always flapping.'

'But that would mean he knows the murderers. I think it's more likely to be Sparshott. His father's the caretaker and they were both there that night when we tried to get the biro back. I bet old Sparshott is in with the murderers, or they wouldn't have buried the Old Python in the quad.'

'I think we ought to call him Mr Pythias now,' said Travis, glancing nervously over his shoulder. 'We don't know that he can't hear us and we don't want his ghost flapping about and telling us off for cheek.'

‘Anyway, what are we going to do?’

‘Pretend to go camping, like we told the chaps we were,’ said the leader firmly.

‘But we didn’t really mean it.’

‘Never mind that. I’d better leave a note and then about midnight we’ll sneak off on our bikes and get as far away as we can.’

‘My bike’s at home and I can’t go and get it without my mother knowing.’

‘Yes, and mine’s in our garage and mum’s put the car away and locked up. Looks as though we’ll have to foot-slog it.’

They made valiant efforts to keep one another awake that night, but both succumbed at about eleven o’clock and it was five in the morning before they tiptoed downstairs, shoes in hand, and crept out of the house. They turned their backs on the road which crossed the heath on which Travis’s note to his father had stated that they would be camping and made their way south-eastward. Travis had decided that Southampton and a ship must be their objective. They must go abroad.

By eight o’clock, leg-weary and ready for breakfast, they had reached the next town and here they went into a churchyard, rested by seating themselves on a flat tombstone and waited for the shops to open.

‘When we’ve had something to eat,’ said Travis, ‘we’ll get on to the main road and hitch a lift.’

‘Will they give boys a lift? I thought it was only hikers.’

‘Well, we *are* hikers, you ass. We’ve got our rucksacks to prove it.’

They bought buns, sweet biscuits, cheese and cans of fizzy drinks and then tried their luck as hitch-hikers, but nobody was interested in two young boys, it seemed, and no car or lorry pulled up to give them a lift.

‘Better push on, I suppose,’ said Maycock. ‘I’m sick of standing here and seeing all the cars whizz by. Come on, shall we?’

They covered another five miles, occasionally standing at the roadside and thumbing the passing cars and lorries again. When this failed, they trudged on once more. It was after they had left the main road and were branching off for a road which would take them across the New Forest and down to Cadnam that a car pulled up about twenty paces in front of them and the driver leaned across, lowered the onside window and beckoned to them.

‘Oh, golly!’ exclaimed Travis. ‘It’s Old Piebald! I know the number of all the staff cars and that’s his. We don’t want a lift from *him*! He’ll tell Old Scarface on Monday he saw us.’

Mr Scaife, however, was never in receipt of this information for the simple reason that on neither the Monday nor the Tuesday had Mr Pybus, the art master, any idea that the boys had not turned up at school or that Mr Travis had been to see the headmaster.

‘What do we do?’ asked Maycock. ‘Make a dash for it? There’s trees over there.’

‘Be your age, you ass. Leave this to me. Come on. He’s waiting for us.’

‘Well, well!’ said Mr Pybus, with the uneasy geniality of a despised although not altogether unpopular pedagogue. ‘Pilgrim’s progress is it, or are we off to join the Foreign Legion? Can I give you a lift? I am going to Southampton, if that’s any help to you.’

‘Oh, thank you, sir,’ said the bold Travis, ‘but my father is meeting us with the car. We’re going across to the Isle of Wight for the day, sir, from Lymington.’

‘It’s a shorter crossing than from Southampton, sir,’ said Maycock, making his contribution.

‘Why, so it is. Oh, well, have a good day.’

‘He’ll have forgotten by Monday that he ever saw us. That’s if he even knows our names, which I doubt,’ said Travis. ‘I once signed one of my paintings Eva Brick and he never queried it. Preston — no, it wasn’t Preston, it was Proudng — betted me I wouldn’t, but I did and Old Piebald never said anything.’

They watched the car until it rounded a bend and then Maycock said, ‘Perhaps we ought to have gone in his car. After all, it’s Southampton we want.’

‘I know, but the less he sees of us the better. If we’d gone all the way to Southampton with him he might have remembered us on Monday and found out we weren’t in school.’

Long before they reached Cadnam both boys were desperately tired and Maycock announced that he had a blistered heel. They still had some food left, although the drinks had gone and the cans had been discarded. They retreated into one of the New Forest plantations and decided to spend the rest of the daylight hours there and push on as soon as night fell.

‘We don’t want to be spotted by anybody else,’ said Travis. ‘Old Piebald was bad enough and next time it might be somebody who would remember us. We’ve got to get to Southampton by the morning and then see what the prospects are for smuggling ourselves on board a liner. It ought to be easy enough if we can find a big enough ship. I expect most of the crew will be on shore leave, and there will be a gangplank down. We need only wait our chance. I went over a big

liner once with my father and there were simply dozens of places where we could hide. We'll have to wait until the ship is too far out for the captain to put back and then they will give us some grub and tell us to work our passage. It's always being done.'

'Won't they wireless the shore and say we're on board?'

'Oh, we'll have to give false names and addresses, that's all. The captain won't know any different.'

'How much further would you say it is?'

'Oh, not far now, I reckon.'

'What will happen if we don't get a ship?'

'We'll have to hang on until we do. I can get money out on demand at a post office when I show them my savings book and we'll just lie up somewhere in the docks area and watch and wait. It's quite simple.'

'If we go into the post office or buy grub, somebody will spot us. We'll have been missed and they'll be looking for us, the murderers, I mean, or our mothers or the police or somebody.'

'Our mothers won't worry. I put in the note we were staying Sunday night with my aunt.'

'Well, what about the murderers? I bet they will find out we've left home.'

'We'll do the post office — that'll be me — and the shop — that'll be you — separately. We mustn't be seen together more than we can help. The murderers will be looking for two of us, won't they? I've read about people on the run and seen it on films. Usually it's a man and a girl and so long as nobody actually sees them together it's perfectly all right.'

They ate the biscuits they had left, and shared the cheese and then lay concealed until dusk. When they moved back on to the road, Maycock was limping.

'I can't go much further,' he said. 'I wish I hadn't come.'

'Would you rather be murdered, you ass? Come *on*!'

But Maycock's luck was in. A long-distance lorry driver picked the boys up in his headlights and, having driven past them, he pulled up and told his mate to ask what they were up to at that time of night. Being informed by Travis that they were bound for Southampton, the mate said that the lorry was going there and reported back to the driver.

'There's a late coach behind me,' said the driver. 'I'll stop him. He'll be going back empty or near enough. I know him. He'll take these kids, I daresay. Been out for the day and got lost in the forest, I wouldn't wonder, young

dunder'eads. Tell 'em to hang on a minute while I flash down the coach.'

Travis was too tired and Maycock too unhappy to argue or attempt to escape, so, while the driver's mate waited on the roadside with them, the driver made signals with his rear lights to the oncoming coach and the boys soon found themselves on their way in comfort. The coach driver was not too pleased about it and told them that he would have to set them down before the coach reached the city centre.

'You'll have to find your own way from Totton,' he said. 'I can't go out of my way. I'm late back from the tour already. Where do you live?'

'Almost on top of the docks,' said Travis. 'We went for a day on our own in the New Forest and got lost. We've been walking for *hours*.'

'You look like it.' He was better than his word. He took them through Totton and as far as the central station. He had to wake them before he could set them down. 'Here we are, then. Know where you are now, don't you?' he said. 'Hop out quick. I'm not supposed to stop here.'

The boys went into the railway station. They were surprised to see by the station clock that it was still only a little after eight-thirty. The lights in the booking hall gave the impression that their surroundings were friendly and reassuring. There was a station buffet. They collected food and cups of tea. Later on, they went into the waiting-room and sat beside a motherly-looking woman who said, 'Wasn't it rough coming over?' Not knowing what she was talking about, they agreed. The waiting room was warm, although the bench on which they were seated was rather hard. People came and went. A man came up to the motherly woman and said, 'Oh, here you are. I've got the car outside.' She got up, smiled at the boys and went out with the man. Still later, a railway official came in and said, 'Hullo, what do you think you're doing here at this time o' night?'

'Waiting for our mum. She's gone to the Ladies,' said Travis.

'Oh, ah.' He went away and, miraculously as it seemed, they were not disturbed again and managed to get some sleep. At seven the next morning they left the waiting room, bought food and tea again at the station buffet and then set out again.

'We'd better ask how to get to the docks,' said Maycock. 'Your map doesn't really show the way, does it?'

'Near enough,' replied Travis, dumping his rucksack and stooping to take his father's Ordnance map out of it. He unfolded and they scanned the large sheet. 'No, it's not really much help,' he admitted.

He had returned the map and shouldered the rucksack again when a thin, dark individual came up to Maycock and said, 'Want to earn a bit of pocket money, sonny?'

'His mother told him not to speak to strange men,' said Travis in a high, mincing voice. The man took Maycock by the sleeve.

'What about it, then?' he said. Maycock kicked him hard on the shin. The man, with an oath, let go and both boys took to flight and almost collided with a policeman.

'What's all this, then?' he said, gripping Travis.

'Sorry,' said Travis. 'Choirboys and we're late for early service.'

'OK.' He nodded and moved on. At the turning to the esplanade, the boys slowed to a walk. Both the man and the constable were out of sight.

'What was that man's game, do you think?' asked Maycock, as they walked on again.

'No idea, but I reckon he was a spiv. What job could he give you on a Sunday unless it was something fishy? Besides, his eyes were like Proudington's and I wouldn't trust Proudington further than I could throw him. He's a wart.'

They followed the esplanade until, at the end of a left-hand turning, they could see the Bar gate. Travis led the way towards it and they halted to look at the structure and then to debate whether to turn right or left. Travis won, as usual, and they found themselves on the quay, in sight of the water and two long piers at one of which a ferry steamer was tied up.

'Why don't we do what we told Old Piebald we were going to do?' asked Maycock.

'Such as what?'

'Cross to the Isle of Wight. It might be much easier than trying to get on board a liner and smuggle ourselves away. Nobody would think of looking for us on the Isle of Wight.'

'What about Old Piebald himself, you ass?'

'You said he'd never remember seeing us, and if anybody asks that lorry driver or the coach driver anything, they'll be able to say they only spotted us going to Southampton.'

'And how far is it from Southampton to the Isle of Wight? There's a ferry from there same as from Lymington.'

'They wouldn't think like that. We told Old Piebald we were going from Lymington and that's what we'd naturally do because it's a much shorter crossing and nearer our homes. Well, they'd soon find we didn't do that, so

they'd never think of Southampton.'

'Well, you may be right and I expect there'd be awful trouble if we were found on board a liner and we'd be found sooner or later because of food. Trouble is, I'm not sure we've got enough money. I mean, we could pay the fare, but then there's keeping ourselves until the police find the murderers and it's safe to go home.'

'You said a post office would give you cash on your savings book.'

'They would in England. I'm not sure about the Isle of Wight. It might be like the Isle of Man and have its own laws and things. Look, I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll lie up here in the station again tonight and then tomorrow, when the post offices will be open again, I'll take out some money and we'll cross by the first ferry that's going.'

'Won't they wonder what we're doing at the station again? That porter, or whatever he was, saw us in the waiting room, you know, and' — Maycock giggled — 'you can't pretend your mother is *still* in the Ladies.'

'Perhaps there's another station somewhere. A place as big as Southampton is bound to have more than one, I should think. Look at London.'

'Never been there.'

'We went up to London to Waterloo, and my dad told me there's Paddington, Kings Cross, Euston and umpteen others and they've all got waiting rooms and refreshments and even shops.'

'Let's ask if there's another station, then.'

'I'm not so hot on asking. The less we speak to other people the safer we are. I don't even like that coach driver knowing we're in Southampton. We're not safe until the police catch the murderers.'

They began to retrace their steps, but, at Travis's suggestion, they divagated from their outward route and found a park. Here they sat on a bench with a woman who was reading a Sunday paper. She looked up from the crossword puzzle she was doing and asked, in an American accent, 'Would you guys know the name of a planet discovered by Sir William Herschel? I guess I know my planets, but I just can't seem to bring this one to mind.'

'Uranus,' said Maycock.

'Why, thank you! Yes, I guess that's right. The last 'u' fits with my downs column. I always say there's no way of beating a real good English education. I guess you attend a first-class school.'

'I'm interested in astronomy, that's all,' said Maycock.

'My, my! Would that be one of your special studies at your school?'

‘No, it’s just a hobby.’

‘I’m afraid we have to be going,’ said Travis, looking at his wristwatch. ‘What did you want to get talking to her for, you fool?’ he said angrily to his friend when they were out of earshot of the bench.

‘What did it matter? She’s only a woman.’

‘Of course it matters. I’ve told you. Get it into your fat head that the fewer people who know we have been here the better.’

Maycock was silent until they had left the park and were headed back towards the town. Then he said, ‘I’m sick of this. I’m going home.’

‘All right. You go. Get yourself murdered. Who cares?’

They walked on, aimlessly now, and found themselves presently in the shopping centre. The shops were closed, but a man was standing gazing in at one of the shop windows. Maycock was the first to recognise him. He caught Travis’s sleeve and pointed with his other hand.

‘Look! There’s Old Piebald again!’ he said. Almost before he spoke, Travis, too, had recognised the man. He bundled his companion into a shop doorway.

‘Take your school cap off and shove it in your pocket,’ he said, ‘and turn up the collar of your raincoat and sling your rucksack on the ground and stand in front of it, with your back to the street. He may be coming this way.’

Mr Pybus, however, did not come their way. They gave him three minutes by Travis’s watch and then Travis said he thought it was safe enough to follow him.

‘Follow him?’ said Maycock.

‘Stalk him. He’s going towards the station. Let’s make sure he’s going to take a train. I expect he is, because he’ll have to be back in school tomorrow.’

They had to pass the shop window into which the art master had been gazing. They paused there for a moment. In the centre of the window was a painting of fishing boats in harbour, a delicate and distinctive bit of work, discreetly framed. Beside it was a placard which read: *Boats at Cos. Exhibition of paintings by Marcus Pybus in gallery at rear. Inspection invited.*

The boys walked on, quickening their pace until their quarry was in sight. Then they followed more slowly, retaining sufficient distance between themselves and Mr Pybus. He approached the station and entered it. Cautiously they followed. There was a queue at the ticket office. They joined it, making sure that there was always a fair number of passengers between them and the art master. When they had heard Mr Pybus ask for a ticket to their home town, they slipped away.

‘Let’s eat,’ said Maycock.

‘I thought you were going home.’

‘Oh, I don’t mind so much now *he’s* gone.’

‘I thought you might like to share a compartment with him.’

‘Oh, stop being funny.’

On other occasions these exchanges would have resulted in a friendly scuffle, but, mindful of where they were, the boys did not indulge in this, but made their way to the station buffet, where the girl who took their money said, ‘Not you two again! Do you live here or something?’

‘Train spotters,’ said the resourceful Travis.

‘I thought that was old hat.’

‘Not while I do it.’

‘Oh, well, be seeing you again, then, I suppose.’

‘If you’re lucky.’ They took the sandwiches and tea to a table and wondered what to do with the rest of the day.

‘Fancy Old Piebald being a real artist!’ said Maycock.

‘Well, of course he is. He’s hot stuff, too. Once I sloshed a whole lot of different blues on my painting just for a rag and he came along and licked a brush and picked out a crescent moon and a lot of moonlight and it turned out to be a jolly good picture.’

‘Fancy him having pictures on show, though.’

‘It’s only a shop, not a proper exhibition.’

‘A beastly important shop, though.’ They finished their meal and meandered out of the station. ‘Tell you what,’ Maycock continued. ‘Tomorrow let’s go to the shop and take a dekko at his pictures.’

‘They wouldn’t let us in. Besides, as soon as I’ve got my money from the post office we ought to be getting aboard that boat to the Isle of Wight.’

The rest of Sunday hung heavily. They found their way down to the docks and looked at the ships which were in and then had a meal at the refreshment room at the terminus station. By this time they both had run out of ready money. They returned to the central station waiting room in the evening and chanced their luck in spending the night in the waiting room again. There were plenty of people in and out of it and nobody questioned their presence there. They left, dishevelled and hungry, early in the morning and went down to the pier to find out at what time the ferry left. They discovered they had plenty of time so, having found a post office, Travis took out some money and they went into a café and had bacon and egg, a roll and butter and a pot of tea before they went down again to the pier.

The crossing down the Solent to Cowes took an hour. It was cold on deck, but they enjoyed themselves. When they landed they explored the old part of the town, bought cakes and soft drinks and then went on to the esplanade and walked as far as Gurnard Bay. Here they had a fright. A man stopped them and said in an official voice,

‘Why aren’t you two in school?’

Travis, as usual, was equal to the occasion. ‘Our Dad’s got his holiday,’ he said, ‘so we’ve got a fortnight off school.’

As this was admissible it was received without further query, but the lads had had a scare.

‘So the Isle of Wight doesn’t have different laws,’ said Maycock. ‘I still want to go home and my heel is sorer than ever. The murderers can’t still be looking for us after all this time, can they? Anyway, I reckon we’d be a lot safer at home than we are here. There’s your dad and mum and your aunt and Mr Ronsonby at school. They’d look after us. What are we going to do when your money’s gone? I haven’t got any left.’

On the Tuesday morning they took a ferry back to Southampton and, in the evening, began the long trek home. This time there was no friendly, fatherly lorry driver and no coach. They slipped into a church after the first few miles and slept in a pew. In the morning they were on their way again.

They were so tired and unhappy and Maycock, who had remained fairly stoical so far, was limping so badly that they did not exchange a single word as they slogged their way homeward. They made frequent stops when they reached the New Forest and, there being no other shelter, they slept under the trees, too worn out and disillusioned to worry too much about the chilly April night.

At dawn they staggered on again and covered another few miles, stopping often to rest. At about teatime they were stopped by a vicar driving a small car. He pulled up and got out.

‘My word!’ he said. ‘You look as though you’ve had about enough of it. What’s the trouble? Get in. You can tell me as we go. Did you get yourselves lost? Tumble in, tumble in.’

Thankfully they obeyed him. He took them to his vicarage. Here he gave them a meal, tended Maycock’s heel and put them to bed. Then he investigated the contents of their rucksacks and next morning he telephoned the police.

16

The Official Opening



I am not so sure,’ said Mr Ronsonby, ‘that the water-lily pond would have been quite such a good idea, after all.’

‘The pond would have been overlooked from three corridors and the library,’ said Mr Burke. ‘It could have been made a repository for rubbish thrown out of windows, I suppose. We have encouraged the school to embrace democracy. The boys could have thought it strange and unfair that access to the pond should have been denied them.’

‘Oxford and Cambridge have rules about quadrangles, do they not?’

‘I know. But tradition must be honoured and our own traditions have yet to be established. To deny the boys access to a pond containing goldfish might seem to savour of Us and Them.’

‘There must be a line drawn somewhere, though. The boys themselves expect it. There is no feeling of security where there is no exercise of authority. I have always been opposed to this modern trend of boys calling their teachers by Christian names and of young masters dressing sloppily so as to be “with it”, as the modern idiom puts the thing. It sets a very bad example, as I have had occasion to point out to Scaife. Anyway, the lily pond has been scrapped and we now have a handsome sum to spend on prizes. Regrettable, but the governors are adamant. I cannot argue with them over the nature of their gifts to the school.’

‘It will have to be books, I suppose.’

‘There must be *some* books, yes, but the governors also suggest wristwatches and cameras, lightning calculators, tool sets and, of all things, conjurors’ outfits. Then they want to give new shirts to the rugby first fifteen and special blazers for the cricketering first eleven.’

‘Thus returning most of the money to its sources of origin. Well have we been described as a nation of shopkeepers,’ said Mr Burke in cynical reference to the way many of the governing body made a living.

‘Exactly. One can hardly blame them and no doubt a boy would be better

pleased with a watch or a camera than with a copy of the works of Shakespeare or a set of Jane Austen's novels. Take young Scaife with you and see what you can do. You know which emporia are kept by members of the governing body. Oh, and don't forget gramophone records. Scaife will know what appeals to boys. He has his occasional uses. I wish his discipline was firmer, though.'

'How about Phillips? Aren't gramophone records more in his line? Won't he expect to choose them?'

'He would choose classical music. No, take Scaife. You can leave the sixth to work in the library and I will keep an eye on Scaife's little boys while he is gone. I'm glad he's got his runaways back. They and the literary-minded Proudning are now spending each break and games period in copying out for me the whole of *A Comedy of Errors*.'

This, as it turned out, was almost the only punishment meted out to Travis and Maycock, for Mr Travis's bark turned out to be far worse than his bite, so, apart from stopping Donald's pocket money until enough had accumulated to replace the sum he had drawn out at the post office in Southampton, Mr Travis had imposed no other penalty and was happy enough to have his son safely back at home.

'You guffin!' he said. 'If you were scared by that letter, why didn't you show it to your mother and me?'

Maycock, in a way, was less lucky, for his mother turned tearful on him and reiterated through her sobbing, 'Oh, how *could* you go off like that without a word? How *could* you go off and leave me all alone?'

Meanwhile, having been relegated to playing a minor role in the hunt for the murderer, Routh was following his own line of enquiry, but was fully prepared, if his chance discovery of the exhibition of paintings turned out to have any significance, to share his knowledge with his superiors a little later on.

In one respect he was lucky. Mr Ronsonby telephoned him and said that at the official opening of the school there would be on display a number of prizes of a kind tempting enough to attract a thief. The headmaster wanted a policeman in plain clothes on duty at the school until the gifts had been distributed, and he asked for the Detective-Inspector's co-operation.

'There is more than five hundred pounds' worth of the stuff,' said Mr Ronsonby, 'more than enough to tempt a petty criminal. Moreover, much of it is readily portable.'

'I'll come myself,' said Routh, who had been wondering how to obtain a seemingly unofficial interview with Mr Pybus without arousing the art master's

or anybody else's suspicions that his questions were other than innocuous. 'I'll have a Detective-Constable on duty as well, but I know all the local sneak-thieves and *they* know *me*, so don't worry about your prizes, sir. I expect they're insured, anyway.'

'Well, thanks to the Church of England, those boys have been rounded up,' said Laura, 'so we need not bother about them when we get to Southampton. Do you think there is anything in this idea that Pybus had pinched Pythias's pictures and is exhibiting and, I suppose, selling them as his own work? If so, he'd be a lot safer doing it in London. Southampton isn't far enough away from the school to be a safe place to pull off a fiddle like that.'

'I think there must be a striking resemblance between the sketch on this letter — I have borrowed it for purposes of comparison — and the picture in the art dealer's window, but we shall see. I am also wondering whether the pictures on exhibition bear a signature and, if they do, whose it is,' said Dame Beatrice.

Routh had described the location of the shop. They had no difficulty in finding it. The picture and the notice were still in the window and it hardly needed much scrutiny of the sketch on the letter to identify the similarities between it and the painting at which they were looking. They went into the shop and to the long room at the back of it where the rest of the paintings were on display.

'Everything is for sale, ladies,' said the proprietor hopefully.

There were at least fifty pictures on the walls of the small gallery. Dame Beatrice took out the letter Pythias had written to Mrs Buxton, looked at the sketch of Greek fishing boats and then studied two or three paintings which she could not believe were the work of the letter writer.

They were copies of the figures and decoration on sixth-century black- and red-figured pottery. One was of a black-figure *emphora* depicting the decapitated Gorgon Medusa with the goddess Athena, the god Hermes and the hero Perseus standing by and holding the Gorgon's head. By the same devoted but laboured hand was a copy of the red-figured vase by the Andokides painter, but, again, although it was a faithful copy of the original, it gave the impression of aiming at nothing more than meticulous accuracy and lacked any kind of spontaneity.

Among the other pictures were a spirited portrayal of the Lion Gate at Mycenae, an impression in sepia of the Cyclopean walls of ruined Argos and, with the narrow end-wall of the gallery all to itself, a large picture of the Acropolis at Athens, masterly in its detail and almost breathtaking in its impact on the beholder. There were also studies, by the same hand, of the theatre at

Epidaurus and the harbour of Piraeus.

Dame Beatrice looked again at the letter, went back to look again at some paintings of Cyclades seascapes, and then bought the picture of fishing boats in harbour for which the drawing in the letter had been a preliminary sketch.

She always carried a small magnifying glass in her handbag, and before she had gone to the counter she had looked at the bottom corners of each picture on show and then handed the glass to Laura. Their findings were the same.

‘Well,’ said Laura, when they were outside the shop, ‘every picture has the same symbol, but no actual signature, yet they are not all the work of the same artist.’

‘And the symbol?’

‘Well, at school we always called it *pi*. It was useful when one was dealing with the measurements of circles. It used to remind me of one of the triolithons at Stonehenge, so I rather liked it.’

‘*Pi* is the letter “p” in the Greek alphabet, of course, and the choice of it by both these artists is very interesting.’

‘Come to think of it, Pythias and Pybus — yes, I see what you mean,’ said Laura. ‘Pybus wouldn’t forge Pythias’s name, but felt he was entitled to use his symbol. I suppose he is entitled to it. Well, either Pythias gave his paintings to Pybus, or Pybus stole them after Pythias was killed. Is that what you think?’

‘I am afraid your second hypothesis is the more likely, but we shall see. I am told that Mr Rattock, the tenant of the attic and, incidentally, Mrs Buxton’s nephew, was the only resident, apart from the Buxtons themselves, who ever entertained visitors. He claims to be an artist. I wonder whether Mr Pybus, the art master at the school, was one of his visitors?’

‘A bit unlikely, don’t you think? How would they have got to know one another?’

‘Possibly because Mr Rattock was a boy at the old school before the present school was built.’

‘What do we do now?’

‘Accept Mr Ronsonby’s kind invitation to attend the official opening of his school and, having made our report on the pictures to Detective-Inspector Routh, we must then wait upon events.’

‘Do you mean that Pybus murdered Pythias and stole his paintings?’

‘Or was given them by Rattock on the understanding that he would not betray him.’

Routh was gratified by Dame Beatrice’s report.

‘It does open up a vista, ma’am,’ he said. ‘I didn’t think I was mistaken about the picture in the shop window. By the way, I’ve tracked down Mr Pythias’s bag of golf-clubs. There is one club missing and forensic think it could easily be the murder weapon. They suggest that one good slosh from behind could have accounted for Mr Pythias and that the club must be hidden somewhere, probably chucked into the river. I’ve given the Super the gen and he is having the river dragged. We’ve never found the murder weapon and, from the state of the body when it was dug up, it wasn’t all that easy to determine exactly what kind of implement could have inflicted the injuries to the head, but we think we know now. Just as a matter of interest, ma’am, I wonder which of the two, Pythias or Pybus, thought of using *pi* as a signature? You say it appeared at the right-hand bottom corner of all the paintings.’

‘Mr Pythias’s letter may supply the answer. If the symbol appears at the foot of that rough but arresting little sketch —’

‘We shall know where we stand. Yes, indeed, ma’am.’

‘Not that it has much significance in itself. There is no doubt that Pybus is selling Pythias’s paintings.’

The idea of holding a cricket match as one of the attractions on opening day had been abandoned, since not enough fathers had volunteered to form an eleven to oppose the school, and masters who, in other circumstances, might have made up the numbers, were to be far too busy to take part in a match. Instead, an athletics meeting of a sort was to be held on the school field, since there was a governors’ prize (against Mr Ronsonby’s wishes) offered to the *victor ludorum*. The master for physical education had backed up the headmaster’s objections, but the alliance had not prevailed against the governors’ insistence.

‘Boys specialise and are encouraged to do so,’ Mr Ronsonby had pointed out. ‘A boy who can win the hundred metres is not expected to go in for the fifteen hundred, and a good long-jumper is not necessarily a good high-jumper.’

‘Nonsense! Nothing like a good all-rounder,’ said the chairman bluffly.

Then there were the exhibitions of work inside the building. These included woodwork, art and a meritorious display of mechanical drawings. There were models of Tudor villages, layouts of Norman manors, a model in plasticene of Stonehenge and pictorial time-charts galore, each contributed by a different form. There was even an exhibition of decorated eggs to be donated by the little boys of 1C, when opening day was over, to the local hospital.

There was also Mr Pybus’s exhibition of arts and crafts. Here one of the paintings on show was of a particularly lurid sunset behind whose crimson and

blood-red skyscape were streaks of apple-green, deep purple and splashes of primrose yellow. In the left-hand foreground a volcano was in very active eruption, shooting up dark crimson and bright orange flames and much thick smoke. The artist, however, had taken care that none of the smoke obscured any part of his sunset, which he cherished, it seemed, even more than his lurid volcano.

Laura drew Dame Beatrice's attention to the crude but arresting work, although nobody could have missed seeing it.

'I wouldn't be surprised if I could name the man who painted that monstrosity,' she said. 'It's awfully like the *Téméraire* picture on the wall of the bedsit Pythias used to have.'

Dame Beatrice waited her turn to speak to a beaming Mr Pybus, who appeared to be receiving compliments from gratified parents. When she had the chance, she asked the name of the painter of *Vesuvius in Eruption*.

'Oh, that?' said Mr Pybus. 'I have really no idea. It was handed in, I believe, by an Old Boy whom I had taught when we were at the old school down the road.'

'It is very striking.'

At this moment a bell rang and Mr Pybus said, 'Have you a seat in the hall? I think that was the signal that the prize giving is about to take place. I must lock up this room, I'm afraid. The staff and prefects have orders to marshal the prize winners and get the audience seated.'

'Will your exhibition be open again when the ceremony is over?'

'Yes, oh, yes, if anybody cares to come along.'

There was another visitor who had noticed the resemblance of *Vesuvius in Eruption* to the *Téméraire at Sunset*. In the early days of his involvement in the case of the missing Mr Pythias, Routh had inspected the bedsitting room and had been extremely interested in the screaming picture which, before he had seen Mrs Buxton's letter, he supposed that Pythias himself had painted.

Leaving his Detective-Constable on guard over the prizes which were on display in the sixth-form room, Routh had made a tour of the building and had spent more time in the art room than anywhere else. He, too, like Dame Beatrice, had made enquiries about the Vesuvius picture and had received the answer that it had been sent in, unsigned, by an Old Boy and that, although Mr Pybus thought it an exaggerated 'and really rather childish and silly piece of work', he had exhibited it 'for sentimental reasons, as the fellow must still have happy memories of his art lessons or he would not have bothered to send the painting

in. Besides, he may be somewhere among our visitors and, if he is, he will expect to see his picture on the wall.'

The prize giving went off as prize givings do. The choir and the orchestra gave of their best, so did the verse speakers. The head boy gave a speech written for him by Mr Burke, the headmaster read the school report, the chairman of governors made a far too long and extremely boring speech and then insisted upon closing the gathering with 'Auld Lang Syne' with everybody joining hands — a proceeding which Mr Ronsonby, compelled to hold the hands of his head boy and the chairman, found particularly embarrassing and distasteful, although it was a relief to know that at last the opening day was over.

Every Picture Tells a Story



Routh had not attended the actual ceremony of the prize giving. Dame Beatrice had waylaid him on her way to the school hall and said, ‘The room Mr Pythias had at Mrs Buxton’s — is it kept locked?’

‘Locked and sealed, but not for some days after the body was found, ma’am. Of course, we had no real evidence that Mr Pythias was dead until the foundations of that pond were dug out.’

‘Were you present when the room was sealed off?’

‘Yes, ma’am, me and the Super saw it done.’

‘Was the painting still on the wall?’

‘Larger than life, ma’am. Now you mention that picture, I suppose you noticed the volcano thing in the art room?’

‘One could hardly miss it. Laura has decided that it was by the same hand as the wall painting in Mr Pythias’s bedsitting room.’

‘I don’t think there can be much doubt about that, ma’am, but we don’t know who painted them, although I might make a guess and so, I reckon, might you.’

‘Yes. When we know for certain who painted both, we shall be able to name our murderer, I fancy. I may have a confession for you in the morning.’

‘Not from the murderer, ma’am, I suppose?’

‘No, I do not imagine it will be from the murderer.’

‘Ah, well, we can’t expect everything, can we? Do you mean you will come to the station and report to the Super? It’s his case now, not really mine.’

‘I shall be there at eleven tomorrow morning.’

When the prize-giving was over, the various exhibitions were to remain on show until ten o’clock. Most of the audience, however, went home after the ceremony. The headmaster entertained the governors to port in his office and had included Dame Beatrice and Laura in the invitation, but they had not accepted it. Instead, they returned to the art room to find Mr Pybus seated at his table. Half a dozen boys were putting the room to rights ready for next day’s lessons, for the

tables had all been moved to the window side of the room and chairs arranged in the empty centre of it so that leg-weary or particularly interested callers could sit facing the pictures.

Mr Pybus stood up when Dame Beatrice and Laura came in. The boys politely left two chairs in the middle of the room for them, said, 'Goodnight, sir,' and went home. Dame Beatrice and Laura seated themselves, but it soon became apparent that Mr Pybus was to expect no other visitors that evening, so the two women came up to the table, Laura bringing the chairs.

'Now, Mr Pybus,' said Dame Beatrice, 'I would be glad to have your opinion. What do you make of this rough but attractive little sketch and this even more attractive and beautifully finished painting?' She laid the open letter on the table and unrolled the picture she had bought at the art dealer's.

Mr Pybus made no attempt to bluff matters out. He said, 'So, the game is up, is it?'

'I think you had better tell me the whole story,' said Dame Beatrice.

'I didn't kill Pythias, you know.'

'But you used his trademark and stole his pictures to pass them off as your own. You will observe the *pi* symbol on the letter as well as on the finished painting.'

'I didn't steal the pictures. They were given to me.'

'I shall be interested to hear chapter and verse about that.'

'By what right? You are not connected with the law, are you?'

'No, I am connected with the Home Office and Mrs Gavin is the wife of an Assistant Commissioner of Police, so you see that we do come armed with a little brief authority.'

'I can't stay here and talk to you about all this sort of thing. I've got to get home.'

'To an extravagant wife for whom a teacher's pay is insufficient to supply what she believes to be her needs?'

'You don't know my wife, do you?'

'I am an inspired guesser with a fairly wide experience of human nature and behaviour. Even at only sixty-seven pounds apiece, I suppose poor Mr Pythias's exquisite paintings are worth selling.'

'He gave them to me.'

Dame Beatrice cackled, but there was no mirth in the sound.

'You must do better than that,' she said. 'You were given the pictures in exchange for holding your tongue on behalf of Rattock about the theft of the

money for the tour to Greece, I think.'

'I insisted on the cheques being sent to the bank. I made that a condition of my silence.'

'Because you and that Buxton nephew thought the cheques might be too hot to handle, I suppose,' said Laura. Pybus covered his face, a purely histrionic gesture which deceived neither of the women. Then he pushed back his chair and stood up. Laura stood up, too, and, with a powerful arm, thrust him back and bluntly told him to remain seated. Before this impressive display of women's lib, Pybus capitulated.

'All right, all right,' he said. Laura resumed her own seat and took paper and ballpoint from her handbag.

'Just rough notes, but we'll get you to sign them,' said Dame Beatrice.

'I won't!'

Dame Beatrice leered at him and he flinched.

'If I am to persuade the police not to bring a capital charge against you, I think you will,' she said.

'That's blackmail!'

'Yes, of course it is. How clever of you to know the word for it,' said Laura. 'It was also blackmail when you demanded the Pythias paintings in return for keeping silent about the stolen money and, of course, about the murder.'

'He came in here at half-past eight this morning,' said the Detective-Superintendent, 'and gave himself up. Swears he knew nothing about the murder at the time. Just believed the story he had been told, that Pythias had gone away for Christmas, leaving the tour money locked up in his room. I don't think, now I've talked to him, that he is cut out for villainy. Perhaps you would like to have a word with Routh. I believe he is expecting you.'

Routh exuded a certain amount of satisfaction when they met. He said he was receiving kudos for the way he had conducted his share of the case. The Super, he added, had been very decent and had had him in while Pybus made his confession. 'How much of it is true may or may not come out at his trial,' Routh went on. 'We shall hold him on a charge of receiving goods knowing them to have been stolen. We've also pulled in Rattock who, of course, is full of injured innocence and denies all of the tale told us by Pybus, but Buxton and his missus, not to mention the furniture van, are also involved, so we've bagged the whole lot of them and will get them sorted out later. We think Buxton was only involved in getting the body to the school quad, although he absolutely denies this and says all he did was to post an envelope for Rattock in Springdale.'

‘I am inclined to believe him,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘I don’t think there is any doubt the body was carried in his van, ma’am, and buried while those chickens were being rounded up.’

‘Yes, but we know that the van was often left in the Buxton’s drive. Rattock, no doubt, knows how to drive it and although he must have had some help with the burial, I have little doubt that Pybus rendered it. Rattock, of course, has denied and will continue to deny the charge of murder and will insist that Pybus named him only to save his own skin. In any case, with so many male tenants at Mrs Buxton’s house, you can scarcely substantiate a murder charge against anybody in particular, I suppose,’ said Dame Beatrice.

‘All Hatton Garden to a bit of costume jewellery it was Rattock’s crime, ma’am, but, as you say, we do need final proof of that and I fancy there is very little chance of having him follow Pybus’s example and sign a confession. When we questioned him he rambled a bit and contradicted himself once or twice, but I put that down to nerves. There’s no doubt he is a very frightened man. What he came out with amounts to this: it’s quite true that he was a boy in Pybus’s art class at the old school before this one was built. Pybus was always on the lookout for talent and took an interest in Rattock, thinking the boy had got a bit of a feel for painting and for colour, so he kept in touch with him after the lad left school. Rattock was the only one of Mrs Buxton’s tenants who was ever allowed to have visitors, but, according to Pybus, his own visits to Rattock were not very frequent. However, now and again he ran into Pythias at Mrs Buxton’s — and on one occasion Pythias went up to Rattock’s attic when Pybus was there and took a big portfolio of paintings with him.’

‘So at some time or other, Pybus became aware that Pythias had a talent far superior to his own.’

‘That’s about the size of it, ma’am. Well, to go back to what Pybus has told us, it so happened that on that breaking-up Friday before Christmas, Pybus paid a rather late visit to Rattock and spotted Pythias’s briefcase in Rattock’s room. Rattock told him that Pythias had had a bit of a turn-up with Mrs Buxton and had taken himself off to a friend’s house, leaving the money in Rattock’s charge as he had been unable to bank it in the dinner-hour.’

‘And Pybus swallowed this unlikely story?’

‘According to what he told us, he swallowed it hook, line and sinker, ma’am, and he swears that, until Pythias didn’t turn up at school and didn’t send in a medical certificate at the beginning of the Easter term, he had no suspicions of Rattock at all. After a bit, when still nothing had been heard of Pythias, he went

to Mrs Buxton's house and asked Rattock a few questions about Rattock's story of being left in charge of the money. Rattock then told him that he was going to keep it, as he reckoned that Pythias was in some sort of trouble and had done a bunk. Pybus says he argued with him and that in the end Rattock agreed to return the cash to the school, but sent only the cheques to the bank and hung on to the actual money.'

'He appears to have embroidered his story a little since he told it to me. Did you ask him anything about the picture of Vesuvius which was on exhibition in the art room?' asked Dame Beatrice.

'Yes, I did mention it. Pybus admitted that it had not been sent in specially for the opening-day exhibition, but that Rattock had given it to him and he had had it for some time. When he was planning this opening-day display, he thought it might prove attractive and eye-catching to what he called "the ignorant laity". He also said he had not told Rattock that he was putting it on show simply because it had not occurred to him to do so.'

'Did you query that explanation?'

'No, ma'am. I thought it was probably true, and it didn't matter much, anyway.'

'I agree that it was true, but I also think that the fact he displayed the painting will prove to be Rattock's Achilles heel.'

'Could you explain that, ma'am? I realise that anybody who had seen the picture in the art room and the wall painting in Pythias's bedsit would have no doubt that the same person painted both, but I don't see how either picture could tell us anything about the murder. I wish you would tell me what you think happened on that Friday night the school broke up. Mrs Buxton's story is that Pythias brought the journey money home with him and, when she refused to have it in the house for the weekend, he went off in a huff to stay with friends. Well, we can't trace the friends and my hunch is that they don't exist. We only have her word for it that he ever intended going away for Christmas at all. She may be lying about that, but it's her story and she's sticking to it.'

'She also avers that a man and a woman called to take away Mr Pythias's effects. That was almost certainly a lie.'

'Oh, yes, we pinned that one down a bit, but only so far. I'm certain in my own mind that Buxton himself sold the things to dealers, but that doesn't prove he murdered Pythias. What's your version, ma'am, of what happened?'

'The same, I fancy, as your own. When Laura visited the house on pretence of wishing to rent a room, she was well aware that Rattock was on the stairs

listening to the conversation. I imagine he distrusted all visitors at that time. It seems quite likely that he overheard that altercation between Mrs Buxton and Mr Pythias on that Friday evening and realised that Pythias had in his charge a considerable sum of money.'

'All clear and fits my own theories, ma'am. So the idea of murder came into Rattock's mind. The thing about which I'm still in the dark is where the murder was committed. On the evidence of the golf-club, which we found in some long grass near the golf-course, it seems possible that the job was done there, but we've quartered the area without finding any other clue and we've been over the rooms at the house with a small-tooth comb. Mrs Buxton says Pythias left the house after their little set-to, but it doesn't sound as though she actually saw him go.'

'Because, of course, he did not leave the house that night. At least, that is my opinion. I think Mr Pythias went to his room that evening and Rattock tapped on the door and was admitted, although doubtless, from the point of view of Pythias, it was a surprise visit. I think they conversed and that Rattock took one of the golf-clubs out of the bag which was probably in a corner of the room, affected to demonstrate some stroke or other, but seized the opportunity to swing the club and kill the man.'

'There's no proof of it, ma'am. We got no prints off the handle of the club we found and the chap who bought the rest of the clubs can't describe the man who sold them to him.'

'Neither the prints of the murderer nor those of Pythias were on the club you found, of course.'

'That's right. Well, we've got a signed confession from Pybus, but there is no doubt that he didn't see the murder committed. He only got suspicious when Pythias didn't turn up at school. Even then, I'm not sure he suspected Rattock. It could have been anybody in the house who knew that the money was there. You pointed that out, and I agree.'

'He probably asked some very searching questions the next time he visited Rattock, and the answers did not satisfy him.'

'You've got something up your sleeve, ma'am. Would you care to come clean?'

'Look at it this way: you and I have seen the pictures which we know were the work of Pythias. We have also (thanks to Pybus) seen the dreadful daub which was on exhibition in the art room. You yourself and Laura have identified the artist as the person who also painted the picture on the wall in Pythias's

lodging.’

‘And so?’

‘Oh, Mr Routh, can you really imagine that Mr Pythias, alive, would have allowed that daub to disfigure his apartment? He must have been dead when Rattock got in and painted that picture on the wall. It was done long before you locked and sealed the room. Although Pybus states that it was Pythias’s absence from school which gave him concern, I think he had seen the *Téméraire at Sunset* and it was *that* which caused him to challenge Rattock. The result we now know. Rattock took the money and, as the price of his silence, Pybus took the Pythias pictures and not only for the money they would bring him. Pybus may not be a genius at painting, but I am sure he is a true connoisseur of art. He is unprincipled enough, moreover, to have been prepared to pass off the pictures as his own work.’

‘Where’s my proof, though, unless Pybus was an eyewitness to the murder and I can make him come clean? I still haven’t a story I can take into court.’

‘Get an expert to remove those thick layers of paint on Pythias’s wall. Unless I am much mistaken, there are bloodstains underneath. Why else should Rattock have put up that hideous and (I am certain) sinister attempt at camouflage in a room which was not his own? Confront Pybus and Rattock with the result when the paint has been removed. They are not habitual criminals, so I think you will have little difficulty in breaking down even Rattock’s resistance, should he attempt to — what is the expression Laura uses?’

‘Bluff it out, ma’am?’

‘The person I am sorry for, ’ went on Dame Beatrice, ‘is Mr Ronsonby. To have a member of staff and one of the Old Boys taken to court for conspiracy, theft and murder is not the best of recommendations for the Sir George Etherege school. Another thing: do not let us forget that Pybus knew about the hole which was dug in the quad.’

‘My own fear *is* for Pybus, ma’am. Now he knows his little game is up, isn’t he the type to do himself a mischief?’

‘Unless he becomes a patient of mine at the instigation of the Home Office, I cannot undertake to say. However, let us leave the last comment with Sir George Etherege himself, who, some time between 1635 and 1691, wrote:

‘Were it not madness to deny

To live because we’re sure to die?’

I do not think you have a potential suicide on your hands. Pybus will still have something to look forward to, one hopes, when his sentence is completed.’

‘He’s an artist, ma’am. They’re apt to fly off the handle when things go wrong.’

‘An artist? Yes, I suppose, if one stretches a point, one may call him that.’

‘He’s better than young Rattock is, anyway, I reckon.’

‘He could hardly be worse, judging by the two examples of Rattock’s work which have come to our notice, but he has been both foolish and dishonest. The dishonesty may be excusable, but the foolishness is not. Imagine putting his mediocre paintings side by side with Mr Pythias’s work in that shop in Southampton and attempting to pass both off as his own! Is there no limit to human self-deception and vanity?’

‘Those are matters we’re all guilty of from time to time, I suppose, ma’am. Maybe we couldn’t bear to live with ourselves if we saw ourselves as we really are.’

‘You are a philosopher, Mr Routh.’

‘No, just a good stupid horse that will eat his oats, ma’am.’

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[scanned anonymously in a galaxy far far away]

[A 3S Release— v1, html]

[April 25, 2007]